“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

“One holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the assembly of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered” (Augustana VII).

The Church “has outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure doctrine of the Gospel, and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ” (Apology VII/VIII).

The Lord Jesus gives John a vision of the Church at the consummation of all things: “Behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev. 7:9–10).

Series Schedule

September 2015 – Fear of the Lord (Rev. Allan Weirschke, St. Paul, Rushville, Neb., and Zion, Hay Springs, Neb.)

October 2015 – Sin (Professor Terence Groth, Concordia University Nebraska, Seward, Neb.)

November 2015 – Justice/Judgment (Rev. Scott Seidler, Concordia, St. Louis, Mo.)

December 2015 – Redemption/Redeem (Rev. Scott Stiegemeyer, Irvine, Calif.)

January 2016 – Justify (Rev. Dan Torkelson, St. John, North Prairie, Wisc.)

February 2016 – Conversion/Regeneration (Rev. Lance O’Donnell, St. Paul, Oconomowoc, Wisc.)

March 2016 – Resurrection (Rev. Bruce Keseman, Christ Our Savior, Freeburg, Ill.)

April 2016 – Sanctification (Professor Charles Schulz, Concordia University Ann Arbor, Ann Arbor, Mich.)

May 2016 – Blessed (Rev. Andrew Wehling, Grace, Liberal, Kan.)

This one, holy, Christian and apostolic Church is here and now, wherever the Word of God is present. The Word of God will have believers; it will not return to God void!

The Church is created and lives by words — specific words, true words and every one of them God’s Words. “Let God be true though every one were a liar” (Rom. 3:4). As Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Luke 21:33).

The Church is commissioned to bring life to the world through God’s Words, so that people may be baptized into eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ and be taught to treasure and observe everything Jesus has commanded.

In her quest for the lost, the Church is often tempted to adopt the words of the culture or society. To be faithful to the Lord who gave her His words, the Church must be faithful to the fullness of God’s Word. If the Church fails to do so, we can easily become like the friends of Job. Despite their love for their friend, their religious and godly talk with their friend, God says to them: “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7).

The Great Commission’s charge to “[teach] them to observe all that I have commanded you” bars the Church from modified meanings of any of God’s Words, lest the hearers cease to hear God and never be brought to the faith through His Word.
Therefore, the Church gladly and boldly, with love for the lost, takes up this glorious commission. Her desire is nothing more than to speak "the truth in love" and "to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (Eph. 4:15–16).

As Lutheran pastors, we are committed to a specific confession of the faith because we have found that confession to be a true and faithful exposition of all of God's Word, namely, the Augsburg Confession, its Apology, Luther's catechisms and all the documents of the Book of Concord.

Why are the real textual and contextual meanings of God's Word so important to us? Because of our commitment to Christ and to His Scripture as God's Word and, most of all, for the sake of the Gospel of Christ. As the Scripture says, "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual" (1 Cor. 2:12–13).

Lest the good and faithful words used to impart "spiritual truths" be taken captive to the redefining efforts of the culture or be lost in often-heard clichés or incomprehensible jargon, it is critical that we return to the real substance of the words as the Lord has filled them in His Word and as they are faithfully explained in our confession. Only in this way shall we be able to receive in faith the fullness of things freely given to us by God and joyfully give them away to others. In other words, we pastors are called to “unpack” these words for our people, pointing to the objective realities revealed in and worked by Jesus Christ for us.

The goal of each study, then, is to examine one of the words of faith our Lord has given to us.
FOCUS

Fear is a basic emotion of fallen humanity. It is usually thought of in a negative way, except when it is helpful in avoiding harm and danger. Many people live with fear daily, those who live in a war-torn land or those going through cancer treatment, for example. Others suffer from irrational fears or phobias that cripple them in their daily lives. Some may urge others that they need to conquer their fears. Yet what is the reaction when this word is combined with the words “of the Lord”? What is your reaction? What would be the reaction of the fearful? For many the reaction is negative, as toward the phrase “the wrath of God.” We would much rather hear about “the mercy of the Lord” and “the love of God.” The meaning of “the fear of the Lord” can be easily misunderstood. Rather than unpack the fullness of this phrase, many use the love of Christ as a means to dismiss this as a part of the Christian faith and the daily walk of this faith.

A study of “the fear of the Lord” as it is revealed to us in Holy Scripture and reflected in our Lutheran Confessions, reveals that “the fear of the Lord,” just like “the mercy of the Lord” and “the love of God,” is meant for our ultimate eternal benefit. We will also see that “the fear of the Lord” is part of the relationship that God has established with His people, those first given the promises as the physical descendants of the patriarchs, and now, all who look back in faith to the salvation procured by the Promised One, Jesus Christ. “The fear of the Lord” is likewise a daily part of the lives of God’s people and shapes how we live those lives under His care. This relationship is with one who is over us in the ultimate position of power and authority. “The fear of the Lord” includes reverence and awe, which are foreign to most in our egalitarian society.

The phrase “the fear of the Lord,” and other ways to which it is referred, is more prominent in the Old Testament, particularly in the Pentateuch, Psalms and Proverbs than in the New Testament. It is set forth as the foundation for spiritual wisdom. It remains an essential part of the life of all of God’s people through all times and places. The specific phrase “the fear of the Lord” is found only 24 times in Holy Scripture (2 Chron. 14:14; 17:10; 19:7, 9; Job 28:28; Ps. 19:9; 34:11; 111:10; Prov. 1:7, 29; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:26, 27; 15:33; 16:6; 19:23; 23:17; Is. 11:2–3; 33:6; Acts 9:31). This study will also look at passages where similar words are used such as “fear of God” and where it is clear from the context that this specific “fear” is what is meant.

The leader may start a discussion as to how the phrase “the fear of the Lord” is used/misused and understood/misunderstood in our society today.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

The Hebrew verb yare means “to be afraid, stand in awe, fear.” It connotes the human reaction of fear. This can indicate being afraid of something or someone. When used regarding a person in a position of power and authority above others, it incorporates also reverence and a sense of awe. This includes one’s proper submission to God. The Hebrew noun yirah can mean “fear” or “reverence” in a more general sense, applied toward anyone or anything that may be feared. The Hebrew noun mora is more specific, used exclusively of an exalted being, including God. This can include also the meaning of “terror.”

The Greek noun phobos first had the meaning “flight,” then “that which may cause flight.” In the New Testament it can mean “fear, dread, terror” and “reverential fear.” This includes not only fear of God’s divine power and judgment, but also dread of displeasing Him to whom is directed the trust and love of His people. The Greek verb phobeo similarly first meant “to put to flight.” It is used exclusively in the passive voice in the New Testament. It can mean “to fear, be afraid,” but also “to show reverence.” Also used a few times as fear, in the sense of “the fear of the Lord” in the New Testament, are the words ekphobos, eulabeia and eulabemai.

The first mention of fear in the Bible is at Gen. 3:10: “And he [Adam] said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.’” This is not “the fear of the Lord” but has its origin in the sin of Adam. All of our fears that are apart from God have
their source in original sin passed down to us from Adam and are shown forth in our actual sins of thought, word and deed, of commission and omission. In contrast to this, consider Gen. 22:11–12: “But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here am I.’ He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.’”

This fear is the fear of the Lord. This is also faith (see Heb. 11:17–19). Moses tells us of this patriarch, then still named Abram: “And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). See also Rom. 4:2–5.

1. The Hebrew parallelism is very instructive of the nature of the fear of the Lord. This is in stark contrast to the word fear used any other way. What are some of the various aspects in the description of the fear of the Lord? (See Ps. 2:11; 5:7; 19:9; 22:23; 25:14; 31:19; 33:8,18; 34:9,11; 40:3; 66:16; 86:11; 111:5; 115:1,11, 13; 118:4, 6; 147:11; Prov. 1:7; 2:1–5; 3:7; 8:13; 9:10; 14:26–27; 15:26, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 23:17; Eccl. 5:7; 12:13.)

From these we can see that the true fear of the Lord includes standing in awe and praising His name; fellowship with God, who comes to His people extending His friendship and establishing His covenant that is meant for all humanity; living under His gracious care in all circumstances of life and depending upon Him for refuge and help; living in trust and hope in His steadfast love and goodness; being instructed in the truth, the knowledge of God and blessed with wisdom and understanding; walking in the truth, which also means rejecting falsehood, as we are led, not only to turn away from, but also to hate evil. Living in faith, in the fear of the Lord, is ultimately all that matters in this life. We live under His favor because of salvation in God’s Son who lived perfectly in the fear of the Lord in our place.

“Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses” (Ex. 14:31). In the Pentateuch, we see the fear of the Lord is the life as God’s people as He has established His covenant, His benvolent relationship with His chosen people, the descendants of the patriarchs. He attached His covenant name, the Lord, to them in the fear of the Lord. (See Ex. 18:21; 20:20; Deut. 4:9–10; 6:1–2, 13–15, 24–25; 8:6–10; 14:23; 17:19–20; 31:12–13.)

Note how the fear of the Lord was to be central to their lives together as God’s special people, God’s chosen nation. The fear of the Lord would establish them in the Promised Land, and only by remaining in it would they retain their land and nation. The fear of the Lord was a requirement not only for the leaders in the tabernacle and later the temple, but also for their civil leaders. (See also 2 Sam. 23:2–4.) Their worship life was to be centered on the fear of the Lord and the rejection of all idols (see also 1 Kings 8:40, 43). In the fear of the Lord they were all to be students of Torah, the Law of God. Their daily individual lives were also to be shaped by the fear of the Lord. Note the connection in Lev. 19:14, 32; 25:17, 36, 43.

Repentance is also a part of life in the fear of the Lord. The call to repentance was a constant refrain to Israel, as it needs to be for us today. Eternal punishment is the end of all who do not fear the Lord. Restoration was graciously bestowed upon those who returned to the fear of the Lord. As you read and discuss these, note the context of these passages: Deut. 10:10–13; Joshua 24:14–15; 1 Samuel 12:14, 24; Jer. 2:19; 5:24; 32:39–40; Hosea 3:5; Zeph. 3:7; Haggai 1:12; Mal. 2:5; 3:5; 4:2; Luke 23:40–43.

We are only restored to live in the fear of the Lord because of Him who fulfilled Is.11:2–3a: “And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.” This is none other than the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

2. While it is not mentioned as much in the New Testament, the fear of the Lord remains a part of the life of all of God’s people after the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of our Savior. Read and discuss: Acts 9:31; 2 Cor. 7:1; 1 Peter 1:17–19; 2:17; Rev. 14:7.

The fear of the Lord could be described as “reverent trust.” It is part of our daily lives as disciples of our Savior (“walking in the fear of the Lord,” Acts 9:31). The reverence is certainly appropriate considering the extent of our own sinfulness and the wondrous love of God for us that is shown in His Son’s self-sacrificing redemption of humanity. Even the term reverence may need explaining.
1. Faithful and ongoing catechesis is foundational for our understanding of the fear of the Lord. In the explanation of The First Commandment, “You shall have no other gods,” we are taught that “we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” What is the significance of fear being grouped with love and trust?

We fear God, not just because He is almighty and holy, but also because He is faithful to His promises and is therefore completely trustworthy. Additionally, we fear Him because His gracious promises are fulfilled in Christ in whom we have salvation, because of the undeserved love and mercy of God for us.

Fear and love are bound with all the other Commandments, which are commentaries on this first and foremost Commandment. “We should fear and love God so that…” Luther wrote in the Large Catechism:

“He declares how richly He will reward, bless, and do all good to those who hold them in high value and gladly do and live according to them. So God demands that all our works proceed from a heart that fears and regards God alone. From such fear the heart avoids everything that is contrary to His will, lest it should move Him to wrath. And, on the other hand, the heart also trusts in Him alone and from love for Him does all He wants. For He speaks to us as friendly as a father and offers us all grace and every good.

This is exactly the meaning and true interpretation of the first and chief commandment, from which all the others must flow and proceed. So this word, “You shall have no other gods before Me” [Exodus 20:3], in its simplest meaning states nothing other than this demand: You shall fear, love, and trust in Me as your only true God. For where there is a heart set in this way before God, that heart has fulfilled this commandment and all the other commandments. On the other hand, whoever fears and loves anything else in heaven and upon earth will keep neither this nor any of the commandments.

So then all the Scriptures have everywhere preached and taught this commandment, aiming always at these two things: fear of God and trust in Him. The prophet David especially does this through the Psalms, as when he says ‘the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His steadfast love’ [Psalm 147:11]. He writes as if the entire commandment were explained by one verse, as if to say, "The Lord takes pleasure in those who have no other gods.”

We also confess that the fear of the Lord is not something we have in and of ourselves, because of our sinful nature and our bound will as far as spiritual matters are concerned. We have in the Augsburg Confession:

“Our churches teach that since the fall of Adam [Romans 5:12], all who are naturally born with sin [Psalm 51:5], that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with the inclination to sin, called concupiscence. Concupiscence is a disease and original vice that is truly sin. It damns and brings eternal death on those who are not born anew through Baptism and the Holy Spirit [John 3:5].”

“Although nature is able in a certain way to do the outward work (for it is able to keep the hands from theft and murder), yet it cannot produce the inward motions, such as the fear of God, trust in God, chastity, patience, and so on.”

Those who deny the total depravity of humanity claim to see the possibility of fear of the Lord in natural man and also a will that may decide to do God-pleasing works. Likewise the natural knowledge of God may be given the status of saving faith.

“The ancient definition of original sin is that it is a lack of righteousness. This definition not only denies that mankind is capable of obedience in his body, but also denies that mankind is capable of knowing God, placing confidence in God, fearing and loving God, and certainly also the ability to produce such things. For even the theologians themselves teach in their schools that these are not produced without certain gifts and the aid of grace. In order that the matter may be understood, we say that these gifts are precisely the knowledge of God and fear and confidence in God. From these facts it appears that the ancient definition says precisely the same thing that we say, denying fear and confidence toward God. It denies not only the actions, but also the gifts and ability to produce these acts.”

2 Ibid., AC II.1–2, pgs. 31–32.
3 Ibid., AC XVIII.9, p. 41.
4 Ibid., AP II.23, page 78
It is only because we are justified by grace through faith for Christ's sake that we live in the fear of the Lord.

“This special faith (by which an individual believes that for Christ's sake his sins are forgiven him, and that for Christ's sake God is reconciled and sees us favorably) gains forgiveness of sins and justifies us. In repentance, namely, in terrors, this faith comforts and encourages hearts. It regenerates us and brings the Holy Spirit so that we may be able to fulfill God's Law: to love God, truly fear God, truly be confident that God hears prayer, and obey God in all afflictions. This faith puts to death concupiscence and the like. So faith freely receives forgiveness of sins.”

The justified, those who live by faith in Christ, live their daily lives as who they are now, a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), being a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit who continues His work of sanctification upon redeemed and forgiven sinners.

TEACHING AND PREACHING OF THE WORD

1. Recall instances from the history of Israel, from the time of the Exodus out of Egypt to the return from exile in Babylonia, when the fear of the Lord was replaced in the hearts and lives of the people with fears brought about by the sinful nature. Compare these with the struggles of the New Israel, the Church Militant, today.

We are sinners like they were. We also doubt His care, reject His guidance, even the servants He sends, but welcome false prophets. We are fearful of the enemies that surround us in this sinful world, but are also influenced by them. However, we also have His gracious promises and enduring presence. We are reminded of what Christ has done for us in fulfilling the promises that were spoken of Him. We look back to the salvation accomplished for us and look forward to the consummation at Christ's return.

2. In what specific ways are the people we serve tempted to fear something or someone else than God?

Knowing the fears and idols of our people aids greatly in applying the Law and Gospel in preaching and teaching, as well as individual pastoral care.

3. God’s people throughout history have been called to live in the fear of the Lord. But God also calls us to not fear anything or anyone else. Examine a number of these passages: Gen. 15:1; 21:17; 26:24; Ex. 14:13; 20:20; Deut.1:21; 31:6, 8; Joshua 8:1; 10:25; Judges 6:23; 1 Kings 17:13; 1 Chron. 28:20; Is. 35:4; 41:10,13, 14; 43:1, 5; 44:2, 8; Jer. 30:10; Ez. 3:9; Daniel 10:12, 19; Zeph. 3:16; Haggai 2:5; Zech. 8:13, 15; Matt. 1:20; 28:5; Mark 6:36; Luke 1:13; 1:30; 2:10; 5:10; 8:50; 12:32; Acts 27:24; Rev. 1:17.

How can these apply to us today? How do God's words of "Fear not!” and “Do not be afraid!” motivate us in the fear of the Lord?

Although we may not have encounters with angels, which are recorded in several of these verses, our fears can be very much similar to those who have preceded us in the faith. As in the past, God in His mercy calls us to repent our fearing any harm (which is very temporary compared to eternity) that anyone or anything can bring upon us. He calls us to trust in Him, trust His Word and look to Him alone in every time of need.

Misunderstanding of the fear of the Lord can cause people to see God only as a stern and angry judge, as Martin Luther saw Him prior to the truth of the Gospel being revealed to Him by the Spirit through the Word. This may cause one to hate and dread God and to separate oneself from the means of grace in Christ's Church. A right understanding can remind us who we are as blood-bought sinners who have been made part of God’s people, His own family. We live together with His children under His guidance and care. In awe and reverence for our Creator and Redeemer, we serve not only fellow believers but all people as His creatures and are led to treat them accordingly. In the gift of faith and work of the Holy Spirit, the fear of everything and everyone else is decreased and weakened, while the true fear of the Lord is increased and strengthened.

5 Ibid., AP IV.45, page 88
4. How can one help to bring a person to an understanding of the fear of the Lord when that person is completely ignorant of the meaning of the phrase?

Even in our egalitarian society, each of us has in our lives those we respect and look up to. This can be a starting point. But also, even in this time of so many broken homes, most have an idea of what a father should be. A father provides for his family, cares for his family, protects his family. He is given respect and honor in his vocation. Children desire to please their fathers but also fear their anger and punishment when they disobey. Far above any earthly father is our heavenly Father, who is holy and just, kind and merciful. Restored to a right relationship with Him through the gift of faith in Christ, we also have a reverent fear of the Lord.

DISCUSSION

1. What do we fear more than God as pastors?

We can be fearful for economic security. We have to take care of our families but also there can be a desire to preserve a certain economic status to which we have grown accustomed. We can be fearful of the congregations we serve, especially those members with power, wealth and influence. We can be tempted to be less than faithful in our office of pastor. We can fear what brother pastors and those with ecclesiastical supervision think of us.

2. Read and ponder for a moment Ps. 111:10: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!” How are we to practice it? How is a good understanding more than knowledge of Scripture and doctrine?

3. Read and discuss Matt. 10:26–33 and Luke 12:4–7. How does Jesus use the word “fear” and how does He encourage us in the fear of the Lord?

SUMMARY

The fear of the Lord is not a dread and terror of Him, which causes us to flee from and avoid Him, but rather draws us to Him in awe and reverence. He has called us into His people, His family, in the new covenant and testament in His Son. Empowered by the Holy Spirit we strive to “fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” As we live under the cross in the forgiveness of sins, we live in the fear of the Lord together with brothers and sisters in Christ in the midst of this sinful world until His return in glory.
Sin

More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
2015-16 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

LEADER’S GUIDE

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FOCUS OF THE STUDY

The topic of sin is, of course, much broader than a study of the meanings of the terms used for sin in the Bible. A thorough review of the topic would include such subtopics as the origin, nature, consequences, classification and, above all, God’s remedy for sin in the saving work of His Son, Jesus Christ. This study focuses especially on the nature of sin, particularly as seen in some of the many words the Bible uses to describe the act of Adam in the Garden of Eden, acts that led to the sin-full condition of every one of his descendants with the blessed exception of Jesus. What results is the unmistakable impression of the profundity, complexity and ubiquitous effect of this tragic condition for all of human life and activity. If we truly comprehend this and honestly accept it, then we are led either to despair or, through the Gospel, to overwhelming joy, thanksgiving and praise. In other words, the more thoroughly we are acquainted with the nature of our sin, the more grateful we are for our rescue from it through the cross and resurrection of Christ. The world of sinners (including us) is always looking for a way to dodge this reality. But only by starkly confronting us with it does the God of the Good News make us ready to hear and believe the Gospel.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF SIN

SIN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

According to the apostle Paul in Romans 5, sin (hamartia, v. 12) entered the world through Adam and his transgression/overstepping (parabasis, v. 14), false step/sin (paraptoma, v. 15) and disobedience/unwillingness to listen (parakoe, v. 18). Thus, Adam’s action as reported in Genesis 3 gives the Scripture’s introductory, radical and paradigmatic description of sin, although the word is not used there. In this foundational narrative, sin is vividly portrayed as a willful act of the first human person against his Creator that involved distrust of God, rejection of God’s words, rebellion against God, dissatisfaction with the God-given role/status in God’s creation, attempt to assert independence from God and alignment with the serpent Satan.

The various aspects of this primeval sinful act, handed down and repeated by all of Adam’s naturally born descendants, are accented with a plethora of words in the Old Testament. The most frequently used term, hatta, has the meaning of missing a goal or way, as in missing or going astray from God’s moral/ethical standard (summarized in the Ten Commandments) or design of creation (as emphasized in the wisdom literature) (Ex. 20:20; Joshua 7:11; Eccl. 9:18). Another frequently occurring term, awon, highlights a conscious, inner departure from God’s way and the resulting state of both objective and subjective guilt (Lev. 16:21; Is. 59:12; Jer. 13:22). The term pesa accent the nature of sin as rebellion or revolt against God as the authority (Ps. 107:17; Is. 58:1; Jer. 5:6). A sinful act may be described as that which is hanef or profane, irreligious, emphasizing a treatment of that which is holy as unholy and thereby polluting it (Num. 35:33; Is. 25:4; Ps. 106:38). That which is ra is evil or morally and qualitatively bad (Gen. 13:13; Esther 7:6; Ez. 30:12). A sense of the ubiquity and multifaceted nature of sin is expressed in the frequent heaping together of these and many other terms, for example, “wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Ex. 34:7; cf. Ps. 51:1–2; Is. 1:4).

SIN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament follows the Old Testament in using a range of words to describe sin. The most common term for sin in the New Testament is hamartia, which carries the similar meaning of the Old Testament term hatta or not hitting the target of God’s standard in moral/ethical behavior (Rom. 3:20, 23; James 4:17; 1 John 3:4; 5:17). Another frequently used term is adikia, wrongdoing, that is, violating, not doing God’s Law (2 Cor. 7:12; Col. 3:25; Rev. 22:11). The term parabasis, transgression, indicates going beyond the boundary of God’s laws, going into forbidden territory, trespassing (Matt. 15:3; Gal. 3:19; 1 Tim. 2:14). Anomia is acting apart from the Law or outside the Law (Matt. 24:12; 2 Cor. 6:14; 1 John 3:4). Disobedience is indicated with the word parakoe (Rom. 5:19; 2 Cor. 10:6; Heb. 2:2). The em-
phasis of disrespect toward God and holy things, impiety or sacrilege is signified with the term *asebeia* (Rom. 1:18; 2 Tim. 2:16; Titus 2:12). That which is morally qualitatively bad, worthless or degenerate is *poneria* (Matt. 6:13; Mark 7:22; Eph. 6:12).

While a review of some of the many biblical terms used to describe sin is instructive, it does not, of course, communicate everything Scripture has to say on the topic. Along with the above descriptions of sin, it must be kept in mind that sin is always a personal act against God (Ps. 51:4), even when directed against the neighbor; flows out of the corrupted/fallen nature (Matt. 15:19) that every human except Jesus inherits (Rom. 5:12, 19) and negatively impacts every aspect of being human (Gen. 8:21; Matt. 7:17; Rom. 8:7; Gal. 5:19). This sinful condition and its every expression place the sinner under the deserved and righteous wrath and eternal punishment of God (Lev. 26:18; Rom. 6:23; Gal. 3:10), a threat and burdensome terror that can only be escaped through Him who had no sin but was made to be sin, “so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

**CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF SIN**


In the Lutheran Confessions, the nature of sin is treated explicitly in connection with the article on original sin in the Augsburg Confession and Apology (Article II), the article on sin in the Smalcald Articles (Part III, Article I) and the article on original sin in the Formula of Concord (Article I in both the Epitome and Solid Declaration). The Smalcald Articles and Luther’s treatment of the Ten Commandments in both the Small and Large Catechisms give many specific, concrete examples of sin.

These understandings of sin operate throughout the Confessions.

Particularly of interest for the confessors is the nature of original sin as their understanding differed profoundly from Rome’s. Rome’s scholastic theologians held that human beings after Adam’s fall still have some ability to love God above all things and to obey His commandments. They confused civil or outward righteousness with original righteousness. The main points of the Lutheran understanding are summarized well in the AC: “Since the fall of Adam, all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers’ wombs, and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin, and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit” (AC II:1–2). This description includes the emphases that original sin (1) is inherited by all naturally born (thus, excluding only Christ), (2) is the result of Adam’s sin, (3) is the complete lack of spiritual powers to truly fear, love and trust in God, (4) is the perpetual inclination and drive to sin against God and one’s neighbor (what the confessors define as “concupiscence” [see, e.g., Ap II:26], (5) condemns the sinner to the eternal wrath and punishment of God and (6) is forgiven by the Holy Spirit through the faith created in Holy Baptism. From the confessors’ perspective, “the more serious faults of human nature [are] ignoring God, despising him, lacking fear and trust in him, hating his judgment and fleeing it, being angry at him, despairing of his grace, trusting in temporal things, etc.” (Ap II:8). This orientation is spelled out concretely in such typical acts as “lying, swearing by God’s name, failure to pray and call upon God, neglect of God’s Word, disobedience to parents, murder, un-chastity, theft, deceit, etc.” (SA III:1: 2). Such sins are actual sins and are the result or outworking of original sin (FC, Ep I:21; SD I:2).

The confessors employ a number of terms or descriptions for original sin: “chief sin” and “root and fountain of all actual sins” (FC, SD I:5); “root sin” (SA III:1:1); “inborn sickness” (AC II:2); “nature-sin,” “person-sin” or “essential sin” (FC, Ep I:20); “spiritual leprosy” (FC, SD I:6); “continual inclination of [fallen] nature” (Ap II:3); “inborn wick- ed stamp,” “interior uncleanness of the heart” and “evil desires and inclinations” (FC, SD I:11); and “disability and ineptitude as far as the things of God are concerned” (FC,
Each underscores how radical, that is, fundamental and thoroughgoing original sin is and how it leaves the sinner with no good spiritual capacities whatsoever. At the same time, the confessors affirm and make clear that original sin is not the nature of human beings, but a thorough corruption of that nature (FC, Ep I:19; SD I:55). Even after the fall, human nature remains a good creation of God, albeit completely corrupted.

In congruence with the Scriptures, the confessors teach that original sin is the result of the disobedience of Adam and Eve (FC, SD I:9) and is passed on in human conception (FC, SD I:7, 27). Likewise, the consequences of original sin for Adam and all his descendants are physical ills, death, the rule of the devil (Ap II:46); eternal damnation “together with other bodily, spiritual, temporal, and eternal misery” (FC, SD I:13) and the wrath of God (FC, SD I:19).

Yet there is good news: Through Baptism God covers up and forgives original sin for Christ’s sake and the Holy Spirit heals and renews fallen nature (FC, SD I:14; Ap II:45). Although original sin remains in the believer, it is no longer imputed (Ap II:36). Finally, in the resurrection, believers will be set free from original sin and will never again commit any actual sins (FC, SD I:46).

TEACHING AND PREACHING

Sin in the Context of Law and Gospel

Using Biblical Examples

As noted in the Scriptural Usage and Understanding of Sin section above, the Scriptures introduce us to and first describe sin (without using the word) in Genesis 3. In and with this tragic and discouraging account are also the first promise and signs of God the Creator’s remedy for sin. Thus, once again we are given a radical and paradigmatic model for how to teach and preach the topic of sin. Several key observations/applications may be deduced.

First, sin is most effectively taught and preached not in abstract, theological terms and descriptions, but in narrative. While the Scriptures do use a gamut of abstract terms, our first acquaintance and the most powerful ones thereafter occur in the biblical stories. In the stories, we experience sin in all its ugliness, complexity and multifaceted destruction as played out in the real lives of real human beings and their very real and personal Creator and Rescuer. Abstractions may distance us, but the stories draw us in and cause us to identify with the characters (in the first paradigmatic case, with Adam and Eve), their anti-God attitudes and actions and the very real-life, concrete consequences. Likewise, the biblical narratives (especially the narrative of Jesus’ death and resurrection) best show us the character of God that gives us our only hope, His self-sacrificing love. While this first narrative in Genesis 3 is paradigmatic or typical and will always have a fundamental place in teaching and preaching, it is not by any means the only sad depiction of sin and its consequences, but only the first of thousands to follow. Similarly, the Scriptures give us thousands of stories of how our forgiving God wipes away sin and its consequences, culminating in the ultimate story of the complete defeat of sin by His sinless Son Jesus. These sin and grace stories, as well as non-biblical ones and stories drawn from contemporary life, make the biggest impact on our hearers.

It might also be noted that the other means of grace follow suit in “storying” us into God’s saving gifts.

Second, this paradigm sin story underscores that sin should not be preached without its remedy of God’s grace in close proximity. As soon as sin is displayed and condemned (and throughout such condemnation) God’s promises and actions to reverse and overcome it are also dramatically announced. The narrative wastes no time in assuring us that although Adam and Eve have caused massive damage to their lives with God, one another and their world, including death, nonetheless God takes immediate merciful action to place the human rebels on His side against the snake, to place Satan under judgment, to limit the sin destruction and to set in motion His plan to rescue Adam and Eve, their children and the creation. Again, an abstract promise is not given, but the essential saving story line: God will completely destroy the devil and his powers by sending a Rescuer who will be both human and God. This Rescuer will suffer profoundly in His battle against sin, the devil and death, but He will most assuredly defeat them. In
the meantime, Adam and Eve and their descendants may look forward to the fulfilling of this promise, even as they must live with tragic results in concrete, daily life.

Third, sin is most powerfully portrayed in personal, relational terms: It involves the personal, inner life of God’s creatures in rebellion against Him and each other. Its remedy involves the personal, inner life of God in response. While sin is always a violation of a God-given standard, at its heart it is rejection of God Himself. The consequences it causes are likewise profoundly personal: broken, distorted, hurting relationships with the Creator and all His creatures. Thus, God the Father’s solution is also radically personal — giving His very own Son to take responsibility for every sinner’s failure, who knowingly, intentionally, lovingly makes every personal sacrifice necessary (including His life) to bring the rebels back into God’s family of love. While preaching and teaching spell out specific, concrete examples of sin, they make it clear that such actual sins are most destructive because they are expressions of the fundamental relational problem — the prideful, untrusting, disrespectful, rebellious personal orientation toward God.

Our teaching and preaching needs to emphasize that God’s solution is personal and a very costly restoration of the initial loving, trusting relationship with Him.

FALSE UNDERSTANDINGS OF SIN AND THE IMPLICATIONS

1. My basic problem with God is that I think, say and do things that are against the Ten Commandments.

   This prevalent misunderstanding identifies sin as primarily a failure in civil righteousness or outward conformity with God’s Law. It leads to the orientation that I can become a better and more acceptable person to God by disciplining myself not to misuse God’s name, to go to church more frequently, to obey authorities, to be kind to people, to be a good husband/wife and not indulge in pornography, to refrain from stealing, to say nice things about others and to be generally content with what I have. If I work harder at this, I will sin less and be more acceptable to God.

   A resolve to work harder at outwardly conforming to God’s design for life is good. But this understanding fails to come to grips with the reality that my basic problem is not individual sins (although these are certainly problematic), but my distorted, rebellious, untrusting, unloving orientation toward God that warps everything about me (all my thoughts, motives, feelings, speech and acts, even those that are good outwardly) and makes it impossible for me to do anything that pleases God. In other words, my fundamental problem is that I am born with a sinful nature that is offensive to God and that makes everything about me sinful and unacceptable to God. My radical problem is that I cannot extricate myself from this sinful, condemning nature, no matter how much I want to or how hard I try. I must be continually brought to see that while my outward life truly does exhibit constant sinning that separates me from God and places me under His judgment, such constant committing of sins results from having a sinful nature that I cannot fix or improve. Even if I significantly clean up my life outwardly, I still remain thoroughly sinful and unacceptable to God because He demands that my outward actions flow out of a heart that perfectly reveres, loves and trusts in Him. I must be made to see that my only hope for God’s favorable attitude and love toward me lies in His actions for me, that it so say, He forgives me because Jesus lived, died and rose again for me.

   Such a false understanding may well lead me to a legalistic, superficial attitude in my relationships with others. I may well think I am loving them as long as I am being nice and not saying bad things about them. This limited understanding of my sin will never produce the genuine love for others that builds a community of real love and trust. So long as I am trapped in that understanding, I will seriously shortchange the bonds of genuine relationship. I will not know the depth of my sin nor depend upon the power of Jesus and His Spirit to change my fundamental nature and empower me to be a genuinely loving human being who deepens and strengthens community.

2. The nature of sin is relative and subjective, varying from person to person, culture to culture and time to time. No one can say for sure what is sinful behavior. The best I can do is follow my feelings; if I feel something is moral and loving, then, for me, it is.

   This common misbelief about sin (even among Christians) rejects the clearly revealed, objective standard God has given in the Ten Commandments, the model of perfect humanity in Jesus and the hundreds of moral imperatives that apply the Law to everyday life.

   To be sure, there is an element of truth in this claim. The biblical laws prescribed for Israel in its life as a political identity (civil law) and religious institution (ceremonial law) were temporary, no longer necessary when their respective purposes were fulfilled. Likewise, some prescriptions given in the New Testament (like the requirement of head covering for women in worship in
Corinth) are cultural applications for biblical principles that will vary from culture to culture and time to time. But the moral Law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments, and given application in countless examples is and will be God's standard for judging sinful behavior until Christ returns. This Law gives an objective, unchanging standard that applies to every person in every culture and time. Thus, the person who feels that God is blessing him in an adulterous relationship feels that he doesn't need to worship and carry out Christian service with others or feels that God is teaching him a truth that goes beyond or is contrary to His revealed Word is profoundly missing God’s clear mark.

Christian life together, community, cannot but be significantly harmed, if not destroyed, when the family of God does not live by the same God-given and divinely certain standard. Thus, the unity and love of the Corinthian community was being severely damaged when it ignored God’s standard for sexual morality and tolerated a man having a sexual relationship with his stepmother. The unity of the community is created by the Spirit who moves and empowers its members to follow the same standard and model of love. Any self-chosen departure from that frustrates or destroys the Spirit’s work of creating and nurturing family.

OBJECTIVE REALITIES

If a medical practitioner ignores or misdiagnoses a patient’s illness, that patient will not receive the treatment she needs to be healed. She may even die. Similarly, when sinners (sick unto death with sin) do not receive the proper diagnosis of their sinful condition, they will remain spiritually unhealthy and may even die eternally. God and His people do not engage in the identification and diagnosis of sin as an end in itself, but as the only means to make dying sinners aware of their deadly condition and of the only treatment that can give them life. To restate the proposition made in the Focus section, the more thoroughly we are acquainted with the nature of our sin, the more grateful we are for our rescue from it through the cross and resurrection of Christ. In Jesus’ ministry, the woman who understood and accepted the depth of her sin, appreciated to an equal degree the depth of Jesus’ love and forgiveness for her. The publican who accurately understood and was convicted by the true nature of his sin responded with heartfelt and genuine repentance. Only when Paul understood and became convinced that his whole life was one of sinful opposition to God did he become the zealous believer in Jesus’ unconditional love and forgiveness for Him.

Faithful teaching and preaching about sin among us will continue to drive us to baptismal waters that forgive and refresh with the life-giving, community-building forgiveness of Jesus, will bring us as hungry and thirsty sinners together around the table where Jesus feeds us with His body and blood and binds us together as mutually grateful brothers and sisters, will lead us to eagerly confessing our sins together so that we may together hear our Lord’s word of absolution and be re-created into His choir of praise and mutually strengthening family.

Proper teaching and preaching about sin will lower the masks and remove the false identities that keep us from knowing and accepting each other as we really are: fellow sinners desperately in need of and overwhelmingly blessed with the Lamb of God who takes away our sin and the Good Shepherd who together leads us to green pastures.

DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think the Scriptures use such a large number of terms to identify and describe sin? Which terms express the Law most strongly? Why?

2. Aside from the accounts of Jesus’ suffering and death for humankind’s sin, what biblical narrative do you think best expresses the nature and consequences of sin? Why?

3. Choose several biblical terms for sin and show how the Bible expresses the Gospel in metaphors that show God’s corresponding remedy.

4. Respond to the frequently made statement, “All sins are the same.” How is this both true and false?

5. How are the Confessions’ variety of descriptions/definitions of original sin helpful for preaching/teaching?
SUMMARY

While sin is not the most important word in the Bible to understand and apply, it is crucial. Without its proper use, such ultimately important words as “Jesus,” “grace” and “forgiveness” will not be grasped and applied for comfort and hope. Again, without a proper understanding of sin, the Law will not be preached in its greatest clarity and severity, nor the Gospel in its purest sweetness. Likewise, the pastor as Seelsorger will only be as effective as his skills for diagnosing sin and prescribing the proper medicine of Gospel. In the end, perhaps the formulation of AC II says most succinctly that which is most important about this word: “All men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers’ wombs and are unable to have true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit.” Or to put it positively: “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).
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Justice

More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
2015-16 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

LEADER’S GUIDE

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FOCUS

Appreciating the character of God through the justice He demands and the judgment He enacts, especially when contrasted with the corrupted judgment of humankind.

“Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles” (Matt. 12:18 quoting Is. 42:1).

In this study, we will grapple with the just character of God who metes out justice (judgment) on all people. On the one hand, on account of sin and evil, this judgment is a terrifying spectre that haunts the hearts of all humankind. On the other hand and because of the Father’s mercy expressed through Christ, such justice (judgment) is “righteousness, godliness and harmony” for and among God’s Church. Through this study, in light of both applications of justice, we will more completely honor God’s injunction to “pray, praise and give thanks.”

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

Key Distinction: The Consistency of God’s Justice Over and Against That of the World

While a large number of passages refer to the day of God’s judgment, the focus of this study intends to dig deeper into the nature of the judging, which God is currently and will be doing when that day arrives. In this regard, distinguishing between the perfect and just judgment of God and the flawed and corrupted judgments of humankind takes center stage.

“It is the unanimous witness of the OT that the people came into being through the conclusion of a covenant with Yahweh. This covenant consisted in the fact that Yahweh entered into a legal relationship to Israel in which He was both legislator and legal partner.”

The Lord’s judgment flows from a divinely originated legal framework; God is the judge and we are those whose lives and actions stand in the balance. The Hebrew mishpat and Greek krisis are the operative terms. Indeed, the fact that there are 22 cognates of the verbal root for judgment — krin— in the Greek — which are used variously and Hebrew and Greek vocabularies provides some evidence of just how robust a concept this is for a truly biblical theology.

One particular passage from the New Testament that stands out is found in 1 Corinthians 6 regarding lawsuits among believers. Here Paul brings the judgment of God into the activity of the Church. In doing so, Paul inculcates the divine nature of judgment in the experience of ecclesiastical supervision and practice.

“When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers! Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:1–11).

1. What are the underlying assumptions regarding:
   a. God’s judgment?

   It is perfect, consistent, holy, in keeping with His character, available to the Church, Christ’s body. Just as we speak of Scripture being clear or perspicuous, so God’s judgment is clear and available to be used and enacted by His Church among themselves and toward the world.

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b. A Christian's judgment?
It is something that can be flawed but is nevertheless esteemed, insofar as it reflects the holiness of God. Christians are called to be judging people, enacting the justice of God on His behalf in this world and among the members of God's household. That a Christian can now make judgments is testimony to the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ, who makes the Christian man or woman His temple.

c. The world's judgment?
It is entirely corrupt and like a fungus that can undermine the integrity of the Christian Church. The judgment of the world is tied for its basis to sensual pleasures, as opposed to the character and command which comes from God.

2. How does the knowledge of a Christian's future responsibility to “judge angels” further illustrate:

a. God's judgment?
The judgment of God is comprehensive. The entirety of creation is tethered to His morally pure character. No part of creation escapes the just demands of God nor does transgression of God's Law only affect a portion of creation (cf. Romans 8).

b. A Christian's judgment?
A now/not yet dichotomy exists here. While at the Day of Judgment we will judge angels with a standard that is pure and holy, we are now in a time when our sinful nature undermines a similarly pure standard of judgment in us.

c. The world's judgment?
The world's corrupt judgment not only undermines our judging but may also undermine our worldview and confidence regarding the future end of days.

CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

Key Commitment: The Pre-eminent Judgment of God Finds Satisfaction in Christ
While the judgment of God typically connotes Law and the punishment that results from breaking it, the Confessions also emphasize the manner in which God’s justice finds propitiation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In a world that reverts to the legal implications of justice and uses judgment as a curb to elicit civil righteousness, such confessional emphasis is welcome clarity and ultimate relief for troubled consciences and tortured lives.

Consider the following passages from the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. Pay special attention to how the judgment due to transgressors of the God’s Law finds completion and fulfillment in the mercy merited us in Christ:

“Confronted by the judgment of god and the terrors of the conscience, trust in works shakes us….Terrified consciences waver and doubt, and then immediately seek to accumulate other works in order to find rest” 2 (Ap IV:20).

“But without the Holy Spirit the human heart either despises the judgment of God in its complacency or in the face of punishment flees and hates God who judges them” 3 (Ap IV:34).

“It is certain that sins are forgiven on account of Christ, the atoning sacrifice, according to Romans 3:25: ‘…whom god put forward as a sacrifice of atonement….’” Thus, this atoning sacrifice benefits us when by faith we grasp the mercy promised in him and set it against the wrath and judgment of God” 4 (Ap IV:82).

“In courts of human judgment a right or debt is certain, while mercy is uncertain. The judgment of God (visited upon Christ) is another thing altogether. Here mercy has God’s clear and certain promise and His command” 5 (Ap IV:345).

“Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work” 6 (Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 11).

1. While the outcome of God’s judgment is terrifying, especially to those outside the Church, why may the sure and certain judgment of God Himself (and visited on Christ) be a source of comfort and peace to a Christian?

By faith Christians understand both Law and Gospel. They have come to appreciate the character of God

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3 Ibid., 125–126.
4 Ibid., 134.
in terms of both His holiness and His mercy. As such, Christians who consider and meditate on God’s judgment tremble simultaneously with fear of what could have been “but for the grace of God in Jesus Christ.” Judgment has passed from us to our Savior Jesus.

2. What nuance and precision do the above citations provide for your preaching and teaching?

TEACHING/PREACHING

USAGE OF THE WORD

Key Commitment: Clarity and Metaphorical Fidelity

1. When preaching and teaching the above concepts of justice and judgment, a common concern raised by many disciples asks, “Who am I to judge others?” or “On what basis do I have the right to speak on behalf of God, given that I am a sinner?” Often such sentiments will bring with them the quotation from the Gospels concerning the log and the speck in the eyes of both the judge and the one being judged. Strive for clarity of thought regarding the justice of God in how it is proclaimed into this world.

- Help your people understand how they are to be messengers of the Judge, not the Judge themselves.
- Encourage your people to appreciate that in spite of the above distinction between messenger and Judge, the history of God’s people demonstrates that the sinfulness of the world is incapable of distinguishing between messenger and Judge. The world cannot make such spiritual judgments! See 1 Corinthians 1.
- Enjoin your hearers to use our calling as the “salt of the earth” and “lights on a hill” as opportunities for more consistent, “daily drowning of the Old Adam” through repentance and absolution. As we make judgments on behalf of God winsomely in the lives of others, we ought to be visiting similar judgment on ourselves but always with the confidence that in Christ the justice of God has passed from us to Him.

   a. Discuss other ways you in your preaching and teaching distinguished between being judgmental and properly executing the just judgments of God toward family, friends and our culture?

b. Share with one another ways that your pastoral judgments in your current call are being received, frustrated, rejected or challenged. Use this time as an opportunity to both encourage one another in your pastoral resolve, as well as to help each other improve the manner in which such judgments are wisely conveyed.

2. Reconsider how you preach judgment to saint-sinner Christians. The Rev. Dr. Jeff Gibbs of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, regularly reminds his students not to preach to Christians as if they were abject, unsaved sinners. Dr. Gibbs’ invitation is to refine our preaching so that the Law of God and its concomitant judgment is surgically applied where it needs to be in the life of a child of God, as opposed to being applied as a bludgeon to one who arrogantly rejects the Gospel.

   a. What are some ways you and your circuit colleagues can identify so that the Law and judgment of God are rightly applied in preaching for those Christians in your congregation?

Help participants distinguish between content, form and delivery. Help them identify how choices regarding the content of the sermon (textual analysis and illustration) can “over-judge” or “under-judge.” Consider how the actual formatting of the sermon — too much Law toward the end of the sermon, for instance — can undermine the Gospel proclamation. Perhaps most vulnerably, consider how facial expressions and body posture and tone of voice can communicate judgment even when the content and form intends Gospel.
FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Given the recent Supreme Court decision (five “justices” to four) regarding gay marriage, how has our peculiarly American understanding of justice and judgment changed? What changing attitudes, reflected by such a decision, are at play in our culture?

You may want to note the difference between judgment based in democracy and judgment that is anchored to the Word of God alone. Reminding participants we are both finite (unable to see the whole picture) and sinful (corrupted by nature which only compounds our finitude) may help accent why attitudes can change so pliably regarding what is right and wrong and the judgment required for assessing what is wrong.

2. How was justice and judgment executed in the family and community in which you grew up? Often times the manner in which we enact justice or judgment on behalf of God correlates to experiences from our upbringing. Was it consistently applied? Was anger (legitimate or unhealthy) attached to it?

Take note of how various participants answer, as this question may evoke some very negative experiences in them — experiences that have significant impact on their approach to judging others today.

3. What role should the human emotion of anger play in the enacting of justice, either personally or pastorally? What about the emotion of sadness? Pride?

There is a place for righteous anger — an anger that has as its focus sin, death and the devil. However, there is no place for personal anger in the pastoral ministry. We recall that the sin against God is just that: sin against God. We are equally guilty before the Law as those to whom we bear God’s judgment. We ought, therefore, to behave as fellow members of the Church and not as the Lord of it.

4. Which of the 10 Commandments pose the greatest challenge for you pastorally in demanding/proclaiming judgment/justice to the nations? Are there aspects of this pastoral challenge that are also a challenge for you personally?

Take note if there is thematic agreement around this question. Such agreement may help further expand the conversation in your own locale.

5. What are some strategies for addressing issues of justice/judgment with your fellow church staff members or elder boards/church councils? Given that different people apply the judgments of God in differing ways with differing degrees of emphasis, how do you go about finding common ground in moving forward when God’s judgments must be proclaimed in particular pastoral or ecclesiastical circumstances?

Work to gain some action points that everyone can put into practice in their own ministries.

SUMMARY

God’s justice and judgment, both krisis and mishpat, invite the theologian-preacher to properly distinguish Law and Gospel. Through the Old Testament covenant, God ordained a legal framework by which His people might understand the boundaries by which they were to live faithfully, as well as the measure by which they would be punished should those boundaries be transgressed. The New Testament heralds the coming of “Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” who actively honored the boundaries established by God and passively offered Himself on behalf of all humankind who had trespasses against Him. In a confused world where justice is wanting and godly judgment is hard to come by, such gracious Good News provides welcome peace and hope.
Redemption
More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
2015-16 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

LEADER’S GUIDE

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FOCUS OF THE STUDY

 Redemption
 Redemption
 Redemption
 Redemption
 Redeem

There is a popular cable television program in which people bring items to a large pawn shop to be evaluated. The patrons hope they have discovered some precious artifacts in their attics but may just as well be presenting worthless junk. Most often, people think of a pawn shop as a place to take goods for some quick cash. Many people do so with the intention of buying the items back when they are able. Everyday use of redeem/redemption comes from the world of trade and commerce.

The word “redemption” means to gain or regain possession of something in exchange for payment. A related term in Scripture is “ransom,” which is the price demanded by a kidnapper for his victim’s release.

In the Bible, redemption often refers to God’s actions to rescue humanity from that which enslaves us. In John 8, the Jewish leaders protested to Jesus that they have never been slaves to anyone, but the Lord knows better. He asserts that everyone who sins is a slave to sin (John 8:34). The apostle Paul also states that we were all once slaves to sin (Rom. 6:16–22), under the power of sin and death (Rom. 8:2) and the dominion of darkness (Col. 1:13). The writer to the Hebrews says that we were enslaved to the fear of death (Heb. 2:15). Bondage is a condition with which we are all too familiar, whether we recognize such or not.

Clearly, we need God to intervene. As slaves to sin and death, it is impossible for us to free ourselves. God sent His only-begotten Son into the world to buy us out of captivity and free us from our tormentors.

At the cross of Jesus, we see the ultimate redemption. We see the ultimate ransom paid.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF REDEMPTION

In the Old Testament

The word for redemption has numerous uses. It can refer to the recovery of property (Lev. 25:24–28) or animals (Ex. 13:13). It can refer to the payment of a price to secure the release of a prisoner of war or the release of a slave (Ex. 21:28–30).

Further, the word “redemption” is often used in the general sense of deliverance (Deut. 9:26; 2 Sam. 7:23; Is. 52:3). God Himself is the redeemer of Israel (Job 19:25; Is. 47:4).

The idea of redemption includes deliverance from all forms of evil:

› from national misfortune (Is. 52:9; 63:9),
› from plague (Ps. 78:35, 52),
› from calamity of any sort (Gen. 48:16; Num. 25:4, 9),
› from difficult personal circumstances (Ps. 34:22),
› from guilt (Ps. 130:7–8),
› or from death (Ps. 49:15).

In the New Testament

The word ἐξαγοράζω connotes purchasing something in the marketplace, the ἀγορά. The ransom, λύτρον, is the cost of our freedom.

In the New Testament, it is made clear that human beings are held under the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13) and of sin itself (Rom. 7:23ff). People who sin become slaves of sin (John 8:34); they cannot free themselves from that slavery. The Redeemer purchases their deliverance by offering Himself as payment for their redemption (Eph. 1:7; Titus 2:13–14; 1 Peter 1:18). You were bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:20; 1 Cor. 7:23). That price was the blood of Jesus Christ (Acts 20:28; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:12; 1 Peter 1:18–19; Rev. 5:9).

His death is also described as payment of a ransom. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28).

There is a sense in which our redemption is now and not yet. When Christ died, the debt owed by humanity was fully paid. “It is finished,” our Lord cried. That payment is fully completed and yet we still continue to struggle against the flesh in this world until the Last Day. Our redemption
is fully consummated at the Lord’s return (Luke 21:28; Eph. 4:30; Titus 2:13–14).

All of creation partakes in our redemption eschatologically (Rom. 8:19–23). This world has an end (1 Peter 1:24; Matt. 24:35; 1 Cor. 7:31; Heb. 1:10–12). It is under God’s judgment (Is. 13:13; Joel 2:30–31; 2 Peter 3:10; 1 John 2:17). Through Jesus Christ, humankind (1 John 2:2) and all creation (Rom. 8:19–21; Col. 1:20) will be renewed. A new heaven and new earth are promised (2 Peter 3:13; Is. 65:17; Eph. 1:10; Rev. 21:1–4).

Set free from bondage to sin and death, we may live as free people (1 Cor. 6:19–20; Gal. 5:1). We freely and joyfully become servants to the true and living God.

CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF REDEMPTION

Regarding our captivity to sin, Martin Luther explains: “Here we must confess what St. Paul says in Rom. 5:12, namely, that sin had its origin in one man, Adam, through whose disobedience all men were made sinners and became subject to death and the devil (Smalcald III, I. Emphasis added.)” 1

The Bible employs numerous models of salvation. There are no particular articles in the Book of Concord that focus exclusively on the notion of redemption as we have explained it. It is simply woven throughout, and the word most commonly signifies salvation in general.

Significantly, however, when Martin Luther explains the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed, he doesn’t center on the theme of penal satisfaction or substitution, though those ideas are always in view. The chief model he utilizes is redemption. While the words “redeem” and “redemption” are often used in the Confessions as general terms for salvation, in the catechism, Luther expressly has in mind the commercial transaction motif:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, in order that I may be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

Note that we are not only redeemed from something, we are redeemed for something.

TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF REDEMPTION

The concept of redemption in the Bible indicates several things. First of all, it says that we are in bondage to sin, death and the devil. Here is where we teach the Law, the need for God’s intervention to save us.

The Gospel is both inclusive and exclusive. It is inclusive in the sense that all human beings are called through the Word to repent and believe the good news. It is exclusive in the sense that only through faith in Christ can sinners be saved. There is no other redeemer for sinners.

There is more than one way to proclaim Law and Gospel. The binary of guilt and forgiveness, though central, is not the only biblical way of speaking. Think of slavery and emancipation as a sermon paradigm.

The biblical ideas of sacrifice and redemption overlap. The writer to the Hebrews shows that it is the blood of Jesus’ sacrifice which is our redemption price. “With his own blood — not the blood of goats and calves — he entered the

Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever” (Heb. 9:12).

Consider the eschatological dimension of redemption. How is it something we possess in the present, but also something we expect in the future?

Discussion

1. Describe why our redemption is necessary.
   
   Here you can delve into the implications of our slavery to sin, death and the devil. It is helpful to describe the utter helplessness of the captive. What are some illustrations you might use in a sermon to portray this powerlessness?

2. To whom is our ransom paid?
   
   Every metaphor has its limitations. In a real sense, we are enslaved to sin, death and the devil. And God really liberates us from those tyrants by the death of Christ. Sin places us under the authority of Satan, but we wouldn't say that God pays the devil. The law that condemns us is God's Law. God satisfies His own justice by the crucifixion of Jesus. In a sense, God rescues us from Himself. It is His wrath and judgment that we fear. By our own doing, God is our ultimate enemy. He is not the author of evil, but the devil and death are His instruments to bring condemnation to sinners. Yet He is also graciously inclined toward sinners for the sake of Christ. This means that though we are by our fallen nature His enemies, He takes the initiative to reconcile us to Himself.

3. Compare the biblical motifs of redemption, satisfaction, reconciliation, justification and regeneration?

   Redemption: To purchase from captivity for freedom.
   Satisfaction: The penalty for sin is paid.
   Reconciliation: Enemies are made friends.
   Justification: Sinners are acquitted and declared righteous in God’s sight. This is a critical point of differentiation between Lutheranism and Catholicism. Justification is the result of being “declared” righteous for the sake of Christ, not the result of being “made” righteous. To be “made” righteous, as Catholicism contends, would mean that our sinful nature has been changed through justification. Yet as the baptized are born again in Christ as a new creation, they are still sinners whose sinful nature is unaltered in all of its corruption. They live as both sinner and saint by faith through the blessed gift of God’s declaration of forgiveness in Jesus Christ for their actual sin and their sinful condition.
   Regeneration: The dead are made alive.

4. What are some of the ways you might apply the message of redemption to your hearers?

   Some people in today’s society are unaware of their guilt before God. Certainly, we must preach the Law in its severity to convict people of their sinfulness. A person can be guilty without feeling guilty. However, many people do feel powerless. They do sense that they are not in control. Build on that. In addiction treatment, the addict is guided to acknowledge his or her total helplessness in the face of their addiction. Yet He is also graciously inclined toward sinners for the sake of Christ. This means that though we are by our fallen nature His enemies, He takes the initiative to reconcile us to Himself.

   To the guilty, Christ speaks absolution. To the captive, He speaks emancipation.
SUMMARY

As St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, God “rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (1:13–14).

The death of Jesus was not the unfortunate demise of an otherwise promising young man. No one took His life from Him. He voluntarily gave Himself to death for us. Divine monergism is the belief that our redemption is totally the work of God through His Son, Jesus Christ. The only contribution we make is our sin. The death of Christ stands alone, the one sufficient ransom: complete and absolute. With this ransom God redeems us, delivering us from all the bondage in which sin had bound us.

In the fifth century, Leo the Great said: “The fact, therefore, that at the time appointed, according to the purpose of His will, Jesus Christ was crucified, dead, and buried was not the doom necessary to His own condition, but the method of redeeming us from captivity.”

Psalm 49 presents a dilemma: “Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice” (49:7–8). This indicates, in part, the significance of the dual nature of Christ. A human being had to die because the penalty was owed by humanity. The blood of Jesus is human blood. But it is also divine. As the one eternal Son of God, only His life is precious enough to account for the lives of all humanity. He paid a debt He didn’t owe because we owed a debt we couldn’t pay.

All the animal sacrifices on the altars of the tabernacle and the temple under the Mosaic Law were offered to God, not to Satan. Hebrews 9:11–10:18 reveals these sacrifices were symbolic of Jesus’ later death. Ephesians 5:2 and Heb. 9:14 show that Jesus was offered as a sacrifice to God.

There is a text in the Bible that gives us a clue as to whom is being paid the ransom. In 1 Tim. 2:5–6, Paul writes: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.” The context of this passage shows us Christ as the “mediator” not between God and the devil but between men and God.

We are effectively saved from God by God. The only deliverance from God’s wrath is God’s love. The ransom now paid, we have been delivered from the domain of sin and death. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

Your soul in griefs unbounded,
Your head with thorns surrounded,
You died to ransom me.
The cross for me enduring,
The crown for me securing,
You healed my wounds and set me free.
(LSB 453:5)

Justification

More Words of Life for the Church and for the World

2015-16 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

LEADER’S GUIDE

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FOCUS

“Whoever falls from the doctrine of justification is ignorant of God and is an idolater.”1

The young Martin Luther grew up on a steady diet of God as the all holy Judge. In contrast to that picture, we humans with our original sin are nothing but guilty souls before Him. Young Martin was probably drawn to the monastery by a desire to get as close to this seemingly merciless God as he could. Still, his conscience would not allow him to think that he could ever measure up to God’s perfect standard in the Ten Commandments.

When he lectured on Galatians in 1531, a more mature Martin Luther made it explicitly clear that he had not known God as He really is. After arriving at Wittenberg to preach and teach and summarily to plunge himself into the Scriptures, he would discover — actually uncover — the truth about God and the Gospel, which was always there but had long been buried. The God of the Bible justifies. He declares “not guilty.” He forgives.

God accomplishes this justification by putting the guilty verdict on His one and only Son. This “blessed trade” is God’s justice, and by human standards it seems quite unfair. Why should the most holy Son of God be declared guilty and the sinner who believes walk away “not guilty”? Still, not only does this “happy exchange” define who God really is, it sets Him apart from all other so-called “gods.” Allah does not die for anyone’s sins.

This news of God’s justification strikes different people different ways. Not all people have the conscience of a Luther. This makes the challenge of preaching and teaching justification more complicated. As we progress into the study, keep three different types of attitudes in mind as an exercise in applying this beautiful doctrine:

1. The Martin Luther: The person who is at risk of losing all hope over the guilt and regret he or she feels over his or her own sins, that is, the person whose conscience is pricked and who does not see God as gracious.

2. The Ignorant: This term is not used as a slight but rather in its technical sense. I use it here as referring to people who simply do not know “their right hand from their left” (Jonah 4:11). They do not think in terms of sin or of God in His grace.

3. The Self-Justified: This is the sort of person who denies sin and ultimately justifies their own actions apart from God’s extra nos declaration (i.e., the “expert in the Law” whose question set up the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37).

Our focus is to grow in our application of justification to the individual person, the Church as a whole and to the world in confused times. Pray that through this study you will be renewed in your strength and clarity in bringing the treasures of justification by grace through faith to all you encounter in your ministry.

SCRIPTURAL AND CONFESSIONAL BASIS—δικαιοσύνη, δικαιοω

In the Old Testament, no one person receives more “justification” or “righteousness” language than Abraham, a fact not lost on Paul in his treatments of it in Romans and Galatians.

Gen. 15:6
What specifically did Abraham believe?

[Abraham believed in God’s promise to make him a great nation and that the Messiah would come from his family.]

Who does the crediting of righteousness? How does this justification extra nos speak to the “Martin Luthers,” the ignorant and the self-righteous?

[This justification, or righteousness, comes from outside ourselves. God speaks it of us. This is a cause for certainty. When asked, “How do I know I am saved?” the Christian can reply, “Because Christ said so!” God doesn’t reduce it to a feeling or an emotion.]

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It’s as true as His powerful Word. This should be the highest comfort to the stricken conscience. Perhaps the ignorant can come to a new appreciation of God and His love for them. The self-righteous should be drawn to a higher plane of thinking, one that is not so self-centered and finds joy in a Gospel that comes from the outside, not the inside.

Luther commented on this “crediting” as coming from outside ourselves, from Christ Himself. And yet, paradoxically, this crediting is credited to us “as if we had won it ourselves.” How does this deepen your understanding of the “blessed exchange?”

[Allow room for personal reflection.]

Abraham’s righteousness leads to a concern for the “righteous” in Sodom three chapters later.

Gen.18:22–33

What does God’s willingness to spare Sodom for the sake of five “righteous” teach us about God’s nature and the importance of God’s justified people in the world?

[God certainly does not delight in the death of the sinner, but rather when he turns from his ways and lives. God’s justified people live on the front lines of the world’s evil and have an opportunity — in prayer and how they live — to be God’s instruments in sparing the unrighteous.]

Perhaps the single most important thing to remember about justification is the fact that this not-guilty verdict comes from outside of us (*extra nos*). This is what Paul rejoices in when he writes about it in Rom. 3:19–28. In the section prior to these verses, though, Paul sets up the discussion of justification by a forthright and stinging section on sin (3:9–18). Paul uses the Law in all its starkness to set up the teaching of justification.

Rom. 3:9–18

What does this section teach us about ourselves and all people?

[That all are sinful and cannot save themselves.]

How total is our sin? Its consequences? Its influence in our lives? How would you communicate this, particularly to the ignorant and the self-righteous?

[While answers may vary, the emphasis should be on the sinner’s complete incapacity to save himself. Sin is so total that it deserves nothing but punishment and prohibits us to do anything righteous apart from Christ.]

What happens to the Gospel of justification if sin is not what Paul writes in these verses?

[It becomes unnecessary. Why should God have to make a judgment of “not guilty” if we can do it ourselves?]

Preaching and teaching the Law is a necessary preamble to any real teaching on justification. God has to declare us “not guilty” because we are not able to exonerate ourselves. There is no excuse for sin, only the righteous demand that it be punished. Having done exactly that to Jesus on the cross, Paul is able to take up the discussion of the *extra nos* character of the Good News of justification.

Rom. 3:19–31

Where do many people look for this righteousness or justification? When Martin Luther looked for it in the same place, what did he find?

[Within themselves (the “self-righteous”). Perhaps they think they should feel saved or that God should speak directly to them apart from His revealed Word. Luther, when he looked for righteousness within himself, found nothing but death and shame. Righteousness simply cannot be found in our sin-blackened, guilty hearts.]

If righteousness came from within ourselves, would this be Law or Gospel?

[Law.]

How does the fact that this righteousness comes from outside of ourselves increase our certainty and confidence?

[It should be comforting that we have a clear word of forgiveness from our Lord and that this forgiveness means freedom for us as we live the lives given us today and eternal life when this body of ours dies.]
CONFESSIONAL USAGE
OF THE TERM

The doctrine that merited the longest treatment of any other doctrine in our Lutheran Confessions was the doctrine of justification in Article IV of the Apology. The length of this article was merited because of the centrality of this doctrine and the strenuous opposition it received in the Confutation, the Catholic response to the Augsburg Confession.

The Catholic critique raised concerns about justification happening without man’s effort. This critique underscores a basic tendency of the sinful nature to assume personal responsibility for our own salvation. In the preamble to Ap IV, Melanchthon writes: “This controversy deals with the most important topic of Christian teaching which, rightly understood, illuminates and magnifies the honor of Christ and brings the abundant consolation that devout consciences need.”

Justification by works robs God of His glory. It also presents the believer with an uneasy platform to stand on with regard to the certainty of his or her own salvation.

What two problems arise for the Christians who are taught they can save themselves by their works? Discuss the implications of this for the ignorant and the self-righteous.

[False confidence or despair or both. The ignorant are at risk for either of the two problems. Both audiences first need an appropriate dose of the Law in order to insure a comforted response. The Law for the self-righteous, in particular, may need to be more pointed, as the problem of false confidence is already in full force. For the ignorant, the Law needs to be applied personally to the helpless reality of every sinner so as to steer clear of any self-saving and to sweeten the Gospel and comfort the conscience.]

Much of the problem between the Catholics and the Lutherans was a matter of terminology. Because righteousness was credited to Abraham by God through faith, terms like “grace” and “faith” become essential to the entire equation. For the Catholics, faith was man’s possession, something he did for God. Grace, because it is infused, gives the Christian the strength to “complete” God’s work of salvation, through good works done as a result of this faith.

For the Lutherans, grace was a term referring to the heart of God Himself, manifesting itself as a desire to freely forgive sins. Justification is credited to the believer by this gracious act of God, and faith merely receives it. Faith, for Paul and for the Lutherans, was not man’s thing he did for God but rather God’s gift. God spoke first, and the speaking worked the faith in Abraham. That faith was locked on to the promise of a Savior. Abraham was “in Christ” (the actual definition of faith) long before Jesus arrived on the scene through His incarnation.

Are “grace” and “faith” terms that are still misunderstood today? How do these terms help to establish what many have called “the Lutheran difference?”

[Misunderstandings of justification, grace and faith are not limited to the Roman Catholic Church. Faith as “my thing I do for God” permeates much evangelical theology and contributes to its tendency to encourage Christians to look for salvation within themselves. As we noted above, there are significant consequences to this sort of salvation. A “justification by grace through faith” is a salvation totally outside ourselves, spoken to us in the forgiveness of sins, given to us through visible means in the Sacraments. Because it is a spoken and visible salvation, this justification is something we can be certain of and thus comforted by.]

Lutherans are often accused by other Christians that we emphasize our differences with them. Still, the issue of how one is saved is not a “molehill” but rather a hill to die on. Justification teaches the center of our identity as Christians. Because it is the doctrine on which the Church stands or falls, it cannot be preached too much.

Christian identity, the identity given us in God’s “not guilty” verdict, is the identity of the person set free. To be declared not guilty is to be acquitted and released from Satan’s prison. Central to the Apology’s explication of justification are verses like John 8:36 and Galatians 5. The teaching of justification by grace is a two-sided coin with forgiveness of sins on the one side and the freedom of the Gospel on the other.

It has been commented that the Lutheran emphasis on freedom as a result of justification offers some of the groundwork for Western democracy in the modern era.

Does the American experiment owe a debt to the doctrine of justification? Contrast the freedom of justification with...
the freedoms of the American Constitution. Do Lutherans preach the freedom of the Gospel much anymore?

[Allow some freedom in answering this question. The only parameters to this discussion should be recognition that American freedom and biblical freedom are

not synonyms. Still, a good discussion of how American freedom is indebted to biblical, justification-based freedom should be encouraged. You may also want to observe that all human law is rooted in God’s Law, which is part of this same discussion.]

TEACHING/PREACHING USE OF THE TERM

The objective of this section is to help the pastor reflect on his teaching of justification. Doing this as a group exercise helps the pastors build sympathy for one another and be more supportive of one another, so doing this as a group exercise is highly recommended.

Some of the most commonly heard terms of the Bible, like “sin,” “grace” and “faith,” frequently come in for criticism as turn-off words. Their use is so common and frequent that hearers expect to hear them and tune out once they are spoken. Still, the Bible has a vocabulary that is the vocabulary of faith itself. These terms are not merely Christian-speak. They are the language of the Bible itself, and God’s people should know these terms.

To that end, the pastor as teacher should not shy away from the term “justification” in his teaching. The use of vocabulary terms, particularly in confirmation instruction, help to establish in the minds of the confirmand the importance of the language of faith. Confirmands do well to learn to appreciate the legal implications of their behavior before God and man. Adolescents, as well as God’s people of all ages, are well-known for having a very clear picture of right and wrong that they apply to others with crystal clarity but not so well to themselves. The doctrine of justification helps younger people apprehend the grace of God for repentant sinners.

› Do I teach the vocabulary of the Bible in my classes? Or do I assume people know these terms without teaching them? Do I avoid these terms altogether?

The term “justification” is often not translated as such when it appears in the Scriptures. Bible translations appear to prefer the terms “righteous” or “righteousness” for translation from this word family. It is important to keep in mind, particularly in preaching, that the actual term “justification” appears to have many synonyms or expressions that convey its beautiful truth quite powerfully. The

language of “not guilty,” “forgiven” and “set free,” among others, more than suffices to keep justification at the center of the pastor’s sermons.

› What metaphors for the Gospel do I prefer and why?

[The group should share their answers as a help to broaden each participant’s own Gospel vocabulary.]

Of course, because the term is a legal term, the fullness of its meaning hangs on the proper distinction of Law and Gospel. In preaching justification, the pastor needs to preach a full-throated Law, the second use of the Law that accuses and establishes the hearer as “guilty as charged.” The more bitter the Law, the sweeter the Gospel. The doctrine of justification is a humbling doctrine. To know that we deserve nothing but death for our sins, but that God has not treated us as we deserved, is a humbling privilege. Christ’s once-for-all cross means forgiveness, life and freedom for me.

› How do I preach the Law? Does it always accuse in my preaching and teaching? Do other types of Law preaching soften my proclamation of justification by grace through faith?
FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Lutherans of the 16th century argued that the doctrine of justification was the article on which the Church stands or falls. But many today would argue that it also is the doctrine the world needs to hear the most today. Discuss how the doctrine of justification, a “forgiveness template” of sorts, would change the discourse on the following issues today:
   a. Same-sex temptation/marriage
   b. The overall health of the American family
   c. Conflict (geopolitical, political and personal)
   d. All forms of inequality/the lack of justice for all
   e. Social media and media saturation

[Allow room for answers to all of these. The main point of the exercise is simply to encourage Gospel-think on these issues.]

2. How does the world view God and the Church today? What does the doctrine of justification by grace through faith have to say to the world’s judgments of the Church?

[God and the Church receive much blame for the world’s condition today. Some political figures have even suggested that the Church needs to change its teaching. To some extent, we should lead the way in repenting over past sins. Perhaps the biggest sin in our past, however, is not preaching, teaching and living justification as what defines us and makes us different from the rest of the graceless world.]

3. Discuss honestly how central justification is to your preaching. Be supportive of one another in this honest evaluation. Does one have to use the specific legal terms of justification and righteousness in order to preach it?

[Leave room for answers and discussion.]

4. Does one have to have the terror-stricken conscience of a Martin Luther in order to apprehend (another Luther term) justification, that is, to come to the humbling realization that this verdict is really yours? Can the ignorant and the self-righteous learn to find comfort in this teaching too? In summary, how would you present this to them again?

[God certainly is to be feared in His judgment. Still, this fear probably can manifest itself in many ways that do not require the absolute terror Luther experienced. Like a young child guilty before his or her parents, a genuine sorrow fears the parents’ authority and appears to be the main ingredient in genuine repentance before God as well.]

5. Do other Christians judge Lutherans rightly when they suggest that we make too much out of our differences over doctrines, such as justification by grace through faith? Discuss the benefit of a uniquely Lutheran outlook for America and the world today.

[While Lutherans clearly have to watch out for legalism or Pharasaism in the way in which we hold to biblical doctrine, it should be noted that justification is a central doctrine that cannot be preached too much. Other churches could certainly afford to look inward and ask themselves if they do not take some doctrines seriously enough. Pray for restoration of unity in Christ’s Church today.]

6. Does the doctrine of justification suffer from inadequate preaching of the Law? Is there such a thing as bad Law preaching? Give examples for your answer.

[In Romans 3, Paul takes up justification only after teaching a stinging and total Law that leaves the reader unable to do anything good on his own and unable to fix the situation. The second use of the Law, its theological use, directly correlates to the sweetness of the doctrine of justification. To be declared not guilty after confessing total guilt makes this doctrine the treasure that it is. Any other Law that does not drive at the sinner’s total guilt before God would soften this wonderful message.]

SUMMARY

The doctrine of justification by grace through faith is the doctrine on which the Church stands or falls. Its importance is not limited to the Church. The forgiveness of sins at the heart of God’s not guilty verdict in Christ offers the highest comfort to the individual Christian and offers a new way of speaking to the world in its current systemic dysfunction. Everything stands or falls on the judgment Christ took on our behalf in order that we might live as free, not guilty children of God. To know justification is to know the heart of a loving and gracious God. This is the difference we Lutherans proclaim to a world that so desperately needs it.
Conversion
More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
2015-16 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

LEADER’S GUIDE

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FOCUS OF THE STUDY

The word “conversion” is used in many different ways throughout our society. We talk about a third down conversion, or the conversion from dollars to euros, miles to kilometers, or degrees Fahrenheit to degrees Celsius. We convert from Microsoft Windows 8.1 to Windows 10 or from a PC to a Mac. We talk about converting our basement into a game room, or converting our traditional IRA into a Roth IRA. When people change churches, they often say, “I’m a convert” from being a Roman Catholic to being a Lutheran.

In most of these cases we would say that we did the conversion; we looked at a chart or read a review. We credit ourselves with making an evaluation of the pros and cons and then deciding whether to make a conversion or not. With this as the background, and with our own sinful nature, it is not surprising that we carry a self-centered definition of “conversion” into our reading of God’s Word.

As we study God’s Word, however, we learn about a gracious and merciful God who does for us those things that we are unwilling and unable to do for ourselves. The goal of this study will be, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to understand “conversion” from God’s perspective. After being instructed by the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, we will look at how understanding God’s use of “conversion” and associated words instructs us in teaching and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

In Acts 15 we read that Paul and Barnabas were sent from their congregation in Antioch to Jerusalem to give an account to the apostles and elders of their first missionary journey: “So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers” (Acts 15:3).

The word “conversion” is translated from the Greek ἐπιστροφὴν. As we consider the meaning of this word, Luke tells us that hearing about the conversion of the Gentiles brought joy to the brothers who heard about it.

This connection between conversion and joy is important and will be emphasized after we spend some time on understanding conversion.

Ἐπιστροφή, according to the Greek-English Lexicon, means “conversion” and also “turning,” as in “turning towards.” The associated verb is ἐπιστρέφω, meaning “turn,” “turn around.” The brothers therefore had great joy because the Gentiles were somehow turned. Questions that arise: What were they turned from? How were they turned?

As the Lord spoke to the people of Israel, He warned them about turning in the wrong direction — turning toward other gods, and other ways of life: “Do not turn to idols or make for yourself any gods of cast metal” (Lev. 19:4); “Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them” (Deut. 11:16).

Neither God’s warning nor His Law kept the people of Israel from turning away from Him. The psalmist writes, “The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one” (Ps. 14:2–3).

Isaiah confesses for all the Israelites that “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned — every one — to his own way” (Is. 53:6a). First, the shepherds that the Lord placed over His people turned and went their own way: “Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep” (Ezek. 34:2b–3).

Not only did they fail to feed the sheep, but they turned them away from the Lord: “My people have been lost sheep. Their shepherds have led them astray, turning them away on the mountains. From mountain to hill they have gone. They have forgotten their fold” (Jer. 50:6; cf. Ezek. 34:6). Turning away from the Lord brings no joy in heaven or on earth.

1 The English Standard Version (ESV). All Scripture references will come from this version unless otherwise noted.
While all turn and go their own way, the Lord in His mercy and grace comes to His people, wanting them to return to Him. The Old Testament reveals to us a God who calls to His people, “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other” (Is. 45:22). Over and over again, through the prophets, the Lord called to the people of Israel: “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?” (Ezek. 33:11).

The Lord said to Jeremiah, “Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, ‘Return, faithless Israel, declares the Lord. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, declares the Lord; I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the Lord your God’” (Jer. 3:12–13a).

The Lord spoke through the prophet Joel: “Yet even now,” declares the Lord God, “I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the Lord your God” (Joel 2:12–13). Zechariah wrote, “Return to me, says 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?” (Ezek. 33:11).

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The Lord spoke through the prophet Joel: “Yet even now,” declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.’ Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster” (Joel 2:12–13). Zechariah wrote, “Return to me, says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 1:3b).

The prophet Malachi wrote for the Lord: “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me” (Mal. 3:6–7a).

Next came John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, who called for the people to repent, to turn to the Lord who was coming to redeem His people. Then, finally, the Living Word of God, the beloved Son of the Father, came to call people back, to call them to repent, wanting them to turn to Him: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1–2a).

It is God’s desire that we turn away from our own ways and turn to Him. The question is this: If we are lost sheep, if we are enemies of God, and if we are dead in our trespasses, how can we turn around? The man lying dead on the operating table cannot restart his heart.

The critical reality is that on our own we are helpless.

God’s Word tells us how this can happen. In His Word we hear that He is the One who turns us around, the One who converts us from going our own way to seeking His forgiving mercy and life-giving grace. King David acknowledges that it is the Lord who turns us, who restores us: “The Lord is my shepherd. … He restores my soul” (Ps. 23:1a, 3a); “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps. 51:10).

David sees his hope and joy in the Lord restoring and renewing him. He cries to God for mercy and forgiveness because God has revealed Himself as merciful and abounding in steadfast love. David acknowledges that it is God who can wash him thoroughly from his iniquity and cleanse him from his sin.

In the book of Ezekiel, the Lord pronounces His promise to restore the lost sheep. In Ezekiel 34, after God announces His judgment on the unfaithful shepherds of Israel, He announces, “Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. … I will rescue them. … I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed” (vv. 11, 12b, 16a).

The Lord continues describing what He will do for the people of Israel who sinned against Him:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ezek. 36:25–27).

Not only does the Lord promise to give them a new heart and a new spirit cleansed from their sins, but he also promises that His very Spirit will dwell in them to lead them in the paths of righteousness. He promises to convert them from lost and condemned sinners to once again be His children.

If there was doubt in the minds of the Israelites, the Lord gave Ezekiel the vision of the valley of dry bones. Dead bones were brought back to life so that the people of Israel could know that the Lord could and would bring them back from death, the wages for their sins (Ezekiel 37).

Then the Lord Jesus Christ Himself speaks: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10); “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. … And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice” (John 10:11, 16a). Jesus will bring, will turn, all to Him as He speaks the Good News.

Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, “Unless one is born again (born from above) he cannot see the kingdom of God. … Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:3, 5). Just as we have nothing to
do with our birth of flesh and blood, the Lord is the One who must convert us, give us new life. The Lord Himself is the One who turns us around, causing the conversion of our hearts, giving us a new life.

Paul writes, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God” (2 Cor. 5:17–18a). The report of joy among the brothers (Acts 15:3) reminds us of Jesus’ teaching in Luke 15 that there will be joy in heaven over sinners who repent.

CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

In the Lutheran Confessions, there is much said about “conversion,” often in conjunction with repentance, faith and new obedience. It is first mentioned in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, but is most often written about in the Formula of Concord, particularly in the articles dealing with free will. The Affirmative and Negative Theses of the Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article II: Concerning the Free Will contrast how true conversion/regeneration happens and how it does not happen.

Affirmative Theses in summary:
1. “Human reason and understanding are blind in spiritual matters and understand nothing on the basis of their own powers.”
2. “As little as a corpse can make itself alive for bodily, earthly life, so little can people who through sin are spiritually dead raise themselves up to a spiritual life, as it is written, ‘When we were dead through our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ’ [Eph. 2:5].”
3. “God the Holy Spirit does not effect conversion without means, but he uses the preaching and the hearing of God’s Word to accomplish it.”

Negative Theses in summary:
1. We reject “The mad invention of the philosophers who are called Stoics, as well as the Manichaeans, who taught that everything that happens has to happen just so and could not happen in any other way.”
2. We reject the Pelagians “who taught that human beings could convert themselves to God … out of their own powers apart from the grace of God.”
3. We reject the Semi-Pelagians “who teach that human beings can initiate their conversion by their own powers, but cannot complete it without the grace of the Holy Spirit.”
4. We reject that a human being, once God has started conversion by preaching the Word and offering grace, has some natural power to cooperate in accepting God’s grace.
5. We reject “that the human being, after rebirth, can keep God’s law perfectly … and that this fulfilling of the law constitutes our righteousness … with which we merit eternal life.”
6. We reject and condemn “the error of the Enthusiasts … [that they are drawn to God] without the hearing of God’s Word.”
7. We reject “that in conversion … God completely destroys the substance and essence of the old creature.”
8. We reject statements that suggest that conversion happens with the willingness of the human being. We teach, however, that God makes willing people out of unwilling people, who then cooperate in the works of the Holy Spirit.

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5 Ibid., 492.
6 Ibid., 492.
7 Ibid., 492.
8 Ibid., 493.
9 Ibid., 493.
10 A summary by the author of the study.
11 Kolb et al., The Book of Concord, 493.
12 Ibid., 493.
13 Ibid., 493.
14 A summary by the author of the study.
9. We reject that before conversion the will of a person is anything but passive.15

In the Formula of Concord, the Solid Declaration, the teaching about “conversion” is continued in more detail. It is repeatedly taught that “before people are enlightened, converted, reborn, renewed, and drawn back to God by the Holy Spirit, they cannot in and of themselves, out of their own natural powers, begin, effect, or accomplish anything in spiritual matters for their own conversion or rebirth, any more than a stone or block of wood or piece of clay [Is. 45:9; 64:8; Jer. 18:6; Rom. 9:19–24] can.”16

An important teaching concerning preaching/teaching is found in the Solid Declaration. The work of the preacher and the desire of the hearer would be in vain “if the power and action of the Holy Spirit were not added to them.”17 “Neither the preacher nor the hearer should doubt this grace and activity of the Holy Spirit.”18

We also read in the Solid Declaration that true conversion includes, as we state in the liturgy, delighting in God’s will and walking in His ways.19 In addition, we read that although a person cannot cooperate in “conversion,” a person can reject the grace of the Holy Spirit that gives faith, the essence of “conversion.”20

When considering Law and Gospel in the “conversion” of man, FC SD V: Concerning Law and Gospel teaches that recognizing one’s sin through the preaching of the Law “is not sufficient for a salutary conversion to God, if faith in Christ is not joined to it. The comforting proclamation of the holy gospel offers [Christ’s] merit to all repentant sinners whom the proclamation of the law has terrified.”21

In conclusion, Luther in the catechesis of the Small Catechism summarizes “conversion”: “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith.”22

TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE TERM

As noted in the focus of this study, the non-Biblical use of the word “conversion” most often makes us the agent of the conversion. Against the voice of Scripture, we hear these claims: “I have decided to follow Jesus” or “I have given my heart to the Lord.” If we believe that coming to faith is a matter of our own will, not only do we contradict God’s Word, but the foundation of our faith is subject to the weakness of our sinful nature.

Dangers come from trusting in ourselves as the one who accepts Jesus as our Savior:

1. If we are responsible for the faith that believes, then how is this not a good work? This leads to a faith that will ask how much more I must do to be righteous before God, a faith that asks where Christ’s merits end and what I must do to finish my salvation. True conversion, turning to God, can only happen if Christ fully and completely paid the price for our sins. Without Christ’s atonement on the cross, there is no hope that God will be merciful.

2. If our faith is based on our own reason, then what happens when our faith is challenged by suffering or a troubled conscience? If faith is not a perfect gift from God, then we will question if our faith is strong enough to be saving faith. If we trust that faith is based on our decision rather than a rebirth by water and the Spirit, there is always room for Satan to ask, “Are you sure?”

There is a wonderful connection between teaching the Law and Gospel, teaching about repentance and teaching about conversion. The Law convicts the sinner and brings the sorrow of repentance. The Gospel comforts the sinner through repentant faith. The Holy Spirit converts the sinner by the Law, bringing him or her to true sorrow, and by the Gospel placing faith in Christ in his or her heart.

15 A summary by the author of the study.
16 Kolb et al., The Book of Concord, 548-549.
17 Ibid., 554.
18 Ibid., 554.
19 A summary by the author of the study.
20 A summary by the author of the study.
21 Kolb et al., The Book of Concord, 582-583.
22 Ibid., 355.
The Spirit turns us toward the person and work of Christ and gives us faith to believe. With faith believers see that the Son of God came down from heaven for them, that Jesus lived His life in perfect obedience to the will of the Father for them, and that He suffered and died for them, taking upon Himself their sins and giving to them His righteousness.

Conversion is the bestowing of faith on the sinner. The sinner receives faith to believe in the forgiveness of his or her sin: faith that frees the conscience from guilt, resists temptation, and brings new obedience into the life of the believer.

DISCUSSION

1. What comfort must the pastor take because the Holy Spirit is the one who converts the sinner? How can this help in preparing sermons?

2. In what way can the pastor teach about the “joy of salvation” prayed for in Psalm 51 when teaching about conversion? How can this joy make a difference in a congregation?

3. How does understanding that the Spirit works through means provide an opportunity to encourage those who are undergoing suffering or living with a troubled conscience?

4. J. T. Muller writes in his *Christian Dogmatics* about “continued conversion.” What would be some theses, affirmative and negative, that would be helpful when teaching about the need for “continued conversion”?

SUMMARY

We preach, teach and confess that the human being is unable to fulfill the law and therefore is unable to be saved by his or her good works. What we are unable to do, God in His mercy has done for us by taking on human flesh and blood. He made the great exchange, taking upon Himself our sin and giving to us His righteousness.

Before conversion, the human being is also unable to believe that salvation is a free gift, that Christ’s life and death free us from sin and death. What we are unable to do, God in His mercy once again does for us by giving us the gift of faith. We are given the gift of faith so that we can be assured it is true saving faith.

Resurrection

More Words of Life for the Church and for the World

2015-16 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

LEADER’S GUIDE

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FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

Is it possible that we’re inadvertently raising gnostics in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod? That is, do God’s people in our care look forward to getting rid of their bodies at death rather than looking forward to having those bodies restored at the resurrection of the dead? Do they long for the day when their souls rest with the Lord, but have little anticipation for Christ’s return, when their resurrected bodies — as well as their souls — will enjoy God’s new creation?

God created Adam with both a body and a soul, so he — and every human since him — remains incomplete without both. Further, Jesus put on bodily flesh for the express purpose of redeeming our bodies. And the importance of these bodies — even if they may return temporarily to dust — should be evident also in the fact that our bodily-risen Savior dwells now in heaven with a body. In fact, He may be the only resident of heaven that currently has a body (depending on how God has dealt with the bodies of Enoch, Elisha and others).

This study will explore what Scripture teaches us about the resurrection of the body, so we can help Christ’s people understand the joyous implications that Jesus’ resurrection has for our lives in the body now, and especially after Christ’s return.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

Old Testament

Here’s the scenario: A member of your congregation has an agnostic but biblically knowledgeable friend. The friend claims that the idea of a resurrection of all people at the end of time was never taught in the Old Testament. He insists that it’s an invention of Christians. The friend is pretty convincing when he says Christians read resurrection into passages like Is. 53:10 (where, the friend says, the natural reading of “he shall prolong his days” has nothing to do with coming back from the dead) and Ezekiel 37 (where, he notes, the dry bones are a metaphor for the restoration of Israel, not a picture of the resurrection of individual believers). The member is flustered and doubting her faith. How do you respond?

How does each of these Old Testament passages teach a future resurrection of the dead?

1. Is. 25:6–9, where the verb for “swallow” often implies destruction.
   
   While the verses do not explicitly teach resurrection, they do explicitly teach that death will in some way be ended by YHWH.

2. Job 19:23–27, in which Job anticipates not just resurrection, but resurrection of his own flesh.
   
   Job speaks of his flesh being destroyed, yet confidently claims that same flesh later will see God. That’s possible only after a resurrection of the dead.

3. Dan. 12:1–3, where the Hebrew verb is “awake.” The imagery of resurrection as an awakening from sleep is continued in the New Testament.
   
   Here, sleeping in the dust of the earth seems to be a clear reference to death, so awakening can hardly mean anything other than resurrection. Note also that this passage teaches a resurrection of all flesh — believers and unbelievers — either to life or contempt.

4. Is. 26:19.

   “Your dead shall live,” “their bodies shall rise,” and “the earth will give birth to the dead” (literally, “to the quiet”) clearly anticipate a future resurrection.

The Hebrew word for “live” (and its cognate “life”) used in this verse may well indicate “eternal life” or “life that doesn’t end with death,” making the adjective “eternal” almost redundant when it modifies “life.” Genesis 2 and 3 make clear that Adam is given life that is not meant to end in death. Medical science generally says a person has “life” if that person has breath, a heartbeat and brain waves. But isn’t that just death waiting to happen? After all, every human who has ever been conceived (with the significant exception of Jesus) begins dying — not living — at the moment of conception. That’s why resurrection is necessary!

While it is true that this passage refers to the metaphorical resurrection of the nation of Israel, the metaphor — especially in verses 12–13 — assumes that there will be a resurrection of human bodies to which the resurrection of Israel is being compared.

To emphasize the hiphil verb, v. 13 could be more vividly translated as, “I will cause you to come up from your graves.”

New Testament

Although the resurrection of both Christ and all dead humans is taught with a variety of terms in the New Testament, the Greek words egeirō (“awaken”) and anistēmi (“rise”), along with their cognates, predominate. When a verb form is used, egeirō is more common than anistēmi; but when a noun is used, biblical writers prefer anastasis to egersis. Several Bible writers repeatedly speak of Christ with the phrase raised out of dead ones (usually translated as “raised from the dead,” although nekrōn lacks an article in Greek). The preposition translated as “from” is occasionally apo, but usually ek, with the object nekron.

Contrary to those who claim that Jesus did not teach a resurrection at the end of time, our Lord refutes the SADDUCEES by stating specifically that the dead are raised (Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37; see also John 5:21). In addition, Jesus implies that Martha is correct when she says, “I know that he (my brother) will rise again in the resurrection on the last day” (John 11:24).

Hope of our resurrection begins with the rising of the One who appropriately calls Himself “the resurrection (anastasis) and the life” (John 11:25). The angel declares, “He is not here, for he has risen” (the verb from egeirō is aorist passive, so perhaps more literally, “He was awakened,” Matt. 28:6). Then the angel bids the women at the tomb, “Tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead” (there’s the phrase apo nekrōn; Matt. 28:7). The Emmaus disciples are told, “The Lord has risen indeed” (again, aor. pass. of egeirō; Luke 24:34). John speaks of Jesus being revealed “after he was raised from the dead” (aor. pass. of egeirō plus ek nekrōn, John 21:14).

The resurrection of Christ became an essential element of the preaching of Peter and the apostles, who frequently employed the same phrase, “raised from the dead” (a form of egeirō with ek nekrōn). See, for example, Acts 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30; and 13:37; as well as 1 Peter 2:21. Paul’s letters echo that emphasis on Jesus’ resurrection, often also using the phrase for “raised from the dead.” (Examples are Rom. 4:24; 6:4; 6:5; 7:4; and 8:11; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:20; 1 Thess. 1:10; and 2 Tim. 2:8.) Paul adds that Jesus was “raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25).

Paul also links Jesus’ resurrection to our resurrection: “He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies” (Rom. 8:11; see also 2 Cor. 4:14). Note Paul’s statement that our bodies (not just our souls) are given life after death. Faith receives the promise of resurrection life (“believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead,” Rom. 10:9, emphasis added). The Holy Spirit especially uses Baptism to bond us with the Crucified and risen 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” (Col. 1:12, emphasis added; see also Rom. 6:1ff). As Peter explains, “He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).

So Jesus’ resurrection leads to our resurrection. That reality alters our lives now, not just our lives after death. Even when our bodies wither, “we do not lose heart” (2 Cor. 4:16), since our bodies, like Christ’s, will be raised to life. In addition, since these bodies — purchased at a great price — will be raised (exegeirō here) with Christ, Paul says they should never be used for sexual immorality; instead, he urges God’s people, “Glorify God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:14–20). Put another way, “He died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor. 5:15, emphasis added). Even Christian suffering provides a hint of future life, for “we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4:11).

Resurrection life belongs to the baptized believer already on earth. Indeed, we have experienced a spiritual resurrection already: “You, who were dead in your trespasses … God made alive. … having forgiven all our trespasses” (Col. 2:13). However, Paul is adamant that the resurrection (anastasis) of the body has not yet occurred (2 Tim. 2:18). So still today, “we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21).

The most complete explanation of the resurrection is in 1 Corinthians 15, so we’ll focus especially on that passage.

1. In 1 Cor. 15:1–11, what truths about Christ does Paul say are “of first importance”?

   That Christ died for our sins (note both that He died and that He died for our sins are essential), that He was buried, that He was raised and that He appeared. So Paul treats the resurrection as equal in
importance to Christ’s death (and to His burial and appearances).

2. Read 1 Cor. 15:12–19. Why is our preaching (and the faith of God's people) in vain if Christ did not rise?
   Without His resurrection, we have no assurance that the judgment against our sin has been satisfied. Further, if He didn't rise, we cannot trust anything Jesus said, since He would have been lying when He promised repeatedly that He would rise.

3. Read 1 Cor. 15:20–34. What is Paul's point in verse 20 (which uses egeirō in the perfect tense, implying continuing effects)?
   Since Christ has been raised, our faith is not in vain, we are not in our sins, those who have died in faith have not perished forever, and we have hope for more than this life.

4. Why might Paul use the term “fallen asleep” rather than “died”?
   Perhaps to indicate the temporary nature of our stay in the grave, while also indicating that it is restful (rather than a time of suffering or purgation). In addition, the term fits wonderfully with the verb egeirō, “to awaken.”

5. What might Paul mean by “firstfruits”?
   When you see the first fruit on the trees in an orchard, you don't assume that's all the fruit you'll see that season; instead, you know more fruit is to come. When Jesus rises, there's no doubt that more resurrection fruit will follow.

6. What implications does the resurrection have for the way we live now?
   For us to go on sinning — or for us to indulge ourselves today because we'll die tomorrow — is contrary to who we are and to the sinless bodies we will have.

7. Read 1 Cor. 15:35–49. Even though a plant looks different than the seed from which it sprouted, both the seed and the plant are the same entity. Likewise, no matter what our resurrected bodies look like when they come out of the ground, we'll still be ourselves. What contrasts does Paul use to help us understand the difference between our bodies now and our bodies after the resurrection?
   Perishable vs. imperishable; dishonored vs. glorified; weak vs. powerful; natural vs. spiritual (which doesn't mean that we'll only have a spirit after the resurrection; after all, Paul is explaining what our bodies will be like).
   Paul writes that Adam received life, but Jesus gives life. And, because we are connected to both Adam and Christ, we have borne the sinful, mortal image of Adam while on earth, but we will bear the sinless, immortal image of Christ at the final resurrection (v. 49).

CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF RESURRECTION

All three ecumenical creeds¹ explicitly confess the resurrection both of Jesus and of all humanity. It is no surprise, then, that the Augustana's article on the Son of God declares that “He truly rose from the dead on the third day.”² The natural result of His resurrection is our resurrection: “On the Last Day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life.”³ But what is unique about how each Creed explains the resurrection when Christ returns?

The Nicene Creed speaks of the resurrection of the flesh (usually translated “body”), emphasizing what is raised, namely, our bodies. The Apostles’ Creed confesses “the resurrection of the dead,” emphasizing the previous condition of those who are raised, namely, that they were dead. The Athanasian Creed states, “All human beings will rise with their bodies,” emphasizing both what is raised (the body) and the universality

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² Ibid., 38.
³ Ibid., 365.
of the resurrection (all the dead, including unbelievers), as the explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed also notes.

The Augsburg Confession devotes a brief article to the resurrection (AC XVII). The brevity does not reflect a lack of importance but rather a lack of dispute, as Apology XVII makes clear. That article also teaches that we will enjoy not just eternal life but also endless joy. Notice the reference to a resurrection to eternal torment for the ungodly. In the Formula, the most significant discussion of resurrection occurs in the article on original sin that distinguishes our pre-resurrection and post-resurrection bodies. It states that the “very substance of our flesh, albeit without sin, shall rise,” echoing Job’s statement, “In my flesh I shall see God, who I shall see for myself.” Further, the Formula argues, if original sin were of the essence of our human nature, then at the resurrection we would either have to receive a (sinless) body not our own or our bodies would remain sinful, both of which are contrary to Scripture. So the Epitome declares that original sin will no longer exist in our resurrected bodies.

The Small and Large Catechisms explain the connection between Baptism and resurrection, not just bodily resurrection on the Last Day but also daily resurrection in the Christian life: “The slaying of the old Adam and the resurrection of the new creature … must continue in us” and “daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” Our daily life of repentance, then, is always lived in view of the resurrection of our bodies.

4 Ibid., 233.
5 Ibid., 539.

TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE WORD

“The old creature, like a stubborn, recalcitrant donkey, is also still a part of [our pre-resurrection bodies], and it needs to be forced into obedience to Christ not only through the law’s teaching, admonition, compulsion, and threat but also often with the cudgel of punishments and tribulations until the sinful flesh is completely stripped away and people are perfectly renewed in the resurrection. … [However, after the resurrection, our bodies] will perform the will of God by the power of the indwelling Spirit of God spontaneously, without coercion, unhindered, perfectly and completely, with sheer joy, and they will delight in his will eternally.”

1. What implications does this have for our preaching?
   Our bodies that are afflicted by original sin need to hear the Law in all its forms, or we will not obey. It also implies that we can fully enjoy life in creation (and the new creation) only when we have a body and when that body has its sinful inclinations removed. Creation is designed for humans with bodies. So without a resurrection we would miss out on the joy of using our bodies to do God’s will in ways that our sinful natures prevent prior to the resurrection.

2. How might Paul respond to Christians who say that we don’t need a resurrection, since our best life is now, not in the distant future?
   If our best life is now, this is a pretty pathetic life, thanks to our rebellion. Without resurrection, all we can ever hope to experience is this current sin-ruined semblance of God’s good creation.

3. How might we preach at funerals in ways that provide comfort and encouragement to those who mourn the death of a Christian without implying that the Christian has already experienced the resurrection that will happen at Christ’s return?
   Assure God’s people that those who have died in the Lord are with Him in paradise (Luke 23:39–43) and are resting from their labors (Heb. 4:9–10; Rev. 14:1–13). Echo the hymn “For All the Saints,” which looks forward to the calm that believers enjoy when our

9 Ibid., 591.
bodies die (“Soon, soon, to faithful warriors cometh rest”), while anticipating a “yet more glorious day” when “saints triumphant rise in bright array.”

4. Which is more important to our salvation (and, therefore, to our preaching), Jesus’ death or His resurrection? Why?

If Christ is not raised, our faith is in vain. To be stuck forever in a box six feet under the soil makes the forgiveness of Christ’s crucifixion useless to me. I need Christ’s resurrection to give me resurrection, so I can enjoy forgiveness. Conversely, to have resurrection without forgiveness is to be raised to life only to be consigned to hell. So Christ’s crucifixion is also essential. In short, without both Jesus’ death and resurrection, we’re doomed, so both must be “of first importance” in our preaching.

5. Since their souls remain alive when the body dies, why should Christians care whether or not their bodies will be raised?

Without a body, we are not fully human. Consider Job 19: The only way we can see with our own eyes the God who loves us, cares for us and redeems us is if our bodies are resurrected (since our bodies can’t see Him now, and souls don’t have eyes). Bodies are also necessary to enjoy the new creation God will make for us.

**DISCUSSION**

1. Does the content of Lutheran preaching tend to imply that Jesus’ occupied cross is more essential to our salvation than His empty tomb? Elaborate. If so, what is the corrective?

2. How can the imagery of sleeping and waking (egeirō) be used effectively in preaching?

3. “We should talk less about burying Christians and more, as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 15, about planting Christians. After all, when you bury something, you put it in the ground and expect it to stay there. When you plant something, you expect it to come out of the ground again.” Respond.

4. How might we preach Christ’s resurrection and therefore our resurrection in ways that encourage Christians whose bodies seem to be wasting away (2 Cor. 4:7–18)? In ways that enable Christians to use their soon-to-rise bodies in ways that live not for themselves but for Him who died and was raised for them (2 Cor. 5:14–17 and 1 Cor. 6:12–20)?

**SUMMARY**

If there is no resurrection of Christ, we have no resurrection. If we have no resurrection, we have no hope. But Christ has been raised. And we have been baptized into His resurrection (and death). So when He returns, dead bodies will not remain in the ground but will be awakened from sleep in the grave. Then, with our bodies as well as souls, we will enjoy life in God’s new creation — for all eternity — the way He intended life to be enjoyed in His present creation. That certainty changes our lives now. We have hope. We have a reason to battle the sinful inclinations that currently inhabit our sin-riddled bodies. In addition, even when these bodies are wasting away, we can live with faith, confident that we will get these bodies back, remade without the effects of sin. Further yet, we are led to use these soon-to-be-resurrected bodies not for self-gratifying purposes but in ways that glorify the One who by death and resurrection — His and ours — gives us back the life we forfeited. In Christ, death has been swallowed up in victory!
FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

To study sanctification is to study holiness, for sanctification is nothing other than the process of making something or someone holy. This moves us from obscurity to confusion. “Holy” is a relic of a word, used regularly in popular parlance in expletives (“Holy ****”) or in derision (“He’s all ‘high and holy’”). Lest we Christians live up to the regular accusation of maintaining a “holier than thou” attitude, we need to get down to a proper understanding of holiness and sanctification. Thereby, we will identify holiness as an essential characteristic of God and sanctification as the process by which the Spirit of God makes us God’s own, forgiving us for Christ’s sake and remaking us after Christ in God’s holy image.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

Old Testament

The verb דֵּק (šàdq) occurs more than 4,000 times in the Hebrew Bible. It possibly derives from the concept of separation and withdrawal. It is a central concept, which appears frequently and pervasively, starting with the creation account. In Genesis 1, the vocabulary of the creation narrative suggests that God is acting like a priest, distinguishing and separating parts of His creation, and thus making a good world able to be filled with an abundant diversity of life. God then rested on the seventh day and made it holy (דֵּק), correlating His sanctification with His blessing (רָב) and setting it off for Himself as uniquely His own by His rest (Gen. 2:2–3). This first instance of the word “holy” indicates that sanctification is an action of God that proceeds from His own holiness. God is holy — perfect in all His attributes, including perfect righteousness, perfect love, perfect goodness and perfect wisdom. His perfection is the source of all goodness, life and blessing. He brings His creation to perfection by taking it as His own, filling it with His presence and shaping it to reflect something of His own character of righteousness, love, goodness and wisdom. The sanctification of the seventh day foretells and anticipates God’s ultimate goal as seen in the Book of Revelation: to sanctify all of creation by His Spirit through the work of Jesus Christ (Rev. 21:2).

As you survey the following passages of the Old Testament, note who is sanctifying and who or what is being sanctified (דֵּק is sometimes translated as “set apart,” “consecrate” or “dedicate”): Ex. 13:1–2; 19:10–11; 29:37; 30:25–30; Lev. 25:10; Deut. 5:12; Joshua 20:2, 7; 2 Sam. 8:11; 2 Chron. 2:4; Job 1:5; Jer. 12:3.

Passages indicate that God sanctifies, but His people also “set apart” people, places and things for God’s particular use. These human “sanctifications” often take place at God’s command, but they are sometimes an act of devotion in response to God’s grace.

All of the sanctifications of days, priests, vessels, altars and places that God commands are commanded for the sake of sanctifying His people. God is reclaiming His fallen creation as His own and bringing it into His service for the sake of bringing His people into a living relationship of holiness with Himself (Ex. 31:13; Lev. 20:8). “I the Lord am the one who sanctifies him/them” becomes the refrain of the holiness code in Leviticus, the specific grounding for the rules of ceremonial sanctification (Lev. 21:8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32). Sanctified by God, His people then “sanctify” God and God’s name as they acknowledge the holiness of the God who is like no other (Is. 29:22–24). In His work of salvation, God sanctifies His name so that the nations may know His character of faithfulness and righteousness (Ezek. 36:21–24); even in judgment, God sanctifies Himself, making His holiness known so that He is rightly acknowledged (Ezek. 38:21–23).

Sometimes the Scriptures describe sanctification gone amiss. Read Judges 17:1–4 to see how sinful people, led astray by their own imagination, can consecrate items for “the Lord’s use” in a sinful way. God’s judgment on His people can be spoken in terms of their failure to properly live according to the holy law as His sanctified people (Ezek. 20:10–14). At the same time, 2 Chron. 30:15–20 illustrates how, through the intercession of a mediator, God’s grace may pardon human failure to “sanctify oneself” in accordance with the Word of God.

As much as the Old Testament can locate “sanctification” within ritual contexts, the relational connection to God and the personal call to His people to live as His “peculiar people” always remain implicit in this word.
New Testament
At His coming, the Lord Jesus Christ does not remove the requirement for God’s people to be holy; He fulfills it (Matt. 5:17–20, 48). Even as Christ releases sanctification from ritual obligations, such as holy days, food laws and circumcision, He underscores the shape of sanctification as obedience to the law, fulfilling it through love of God and love of neighbor (Matt. 5:43–48; 22:37–40).

The noun “sanctification” (ἁγιασμός) occurs only a handful of times in the New Testament, but its meaning is elucidated by the more frequent verb “sanctify” (ἁγιάζω) and the very frequent adjective “holy” (ἅγιος). Sanctification continues to mean “separation for God’s use” and “belonging exclusively to God,” often with the implication that the sanctified reflects this relationship in its own character (e.g., the lamb for offering was to be spotless). As with Old Testament usage, the New Testament can describe the sanctification of ritual objects, such as gifts for sacrifice (Matt. 23:17, 19). Even unbelieving spouses are “sanctified” (made acceptable marriage partners) by their contact with their holy Christian spouse (1 Cor. 7:14). Marriage and food are sanctified by the Word of God and prayer (1 Tim. 4:4–5).

Sanctified by the Father (John 10:36), Christ sanctified Himself (John 17:19), setting Himself apart to do the Father’s will by going to the cross. He becomes our sanctification by achieving for us the forgiveness of sins and the other gifts wrought in us by the Holy Spirit. His sanctification is then our sanctification. Our sanctification includes becoming more and more like Christ, both individually and corporately, as the Body of Christ grows to its full maturity after His image (Eph. 4:11–16). Read John 17, Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer, in which the Lord prays for the sanctification of His disciples (including us) and affirms that He has sanctified Himself to fulfill God’s purpose for Himself with respect to us. That He prays for His and the Father’s people indicates that He is praying for those who “belong to God” as the sanctified. What glory, what knowledge and what presence are linked with their/our sanctification in this passage?

The Father will glorify the Son, who has glorified the Father in His faithful ministry. The Son enjoyed glory with the Father before the world began. The Son is glorified in the disciples; He will give them His glory; they will see His glory with the Father.

The Son knows the Father. The disciples know the true God and Jesus Christ, especially that He was sent from the Father. They know His name, His words and His truth. Through their witness, the world, too, will come to know that Jesus was sent from the Father and that the Father has loved them.

Taking “presence” in a loose sense, the disciples will be “present” with one another in the unity given them in Christ, as they together are “in the name” of the Father, “in” the Father and the Son, with the Father and Son “in them.” They will be “with” Christ, with the very love of the Father for the Son “in them.”

The classical Lutheran understanding that sanctification has both narrow and broad senses finds support in the Scriptures. Sometimes sanctification is described as the consequence of serving God in righteousness (Rom. 6:19, 22; 1 Thess. 4:1–8; 1 Tim. 2:15). This would be the narrow sense of the new life of holiness, actively lived in Christ. It remains a goal to strive for by the power of God’s Spirit (Heb. 12:14). Sometimes sanctification is referenced as a present reality for all Christians, in that the Holy Spirit has already made them God’s own through the forgiveness of sins in the proclamation of the Gospel. Christ is our sanctification now (1 Cor. 1:30); we have already been sanctified, just as we have already been brought to faith and Baptism (2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 5:25–27). Thus, St. Peter declares that the Gentiles are already holy through faith in the Word (Acts 15:8–9). This broader sense of sanctification includes the saving work of the Holy Spirit, who brings us into Christ’s salvation and makes us the children of God through the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of Christ’s alien righteousness. Hence, sanctification in the broad sense includes justification. Both the broad and the narrow usage of “sanctify” stand close together in Heb. 10:10–14, which declares that we “have been sanctified” (perfect tense) through the offering of Jesus Christ, and that He has perfected those who are “being sanctified” (present tense).

First Peter has been described as a baptismal sermon, exhorting new Christians to live fully the life given them freely in Christ. Break into four groups to read the following passages: 1 Peter 1:13–19, 20–25; 2:1–5, 9–12. As you read, highlight the words that describe what has been given and done, including the new relationship with God, and then how Christians are to live. The new life includes elements of stopping certain activities, initiating others and redirecting everything to God’s new purpose.

Each section includes Gospel elements declaring how we have been brought to Christ, redeemed, with God
as our Father, and made to be God's own. Peter highlights the Word of God (the pure milk) as the means through which we have been saved. Sanctification is grounded in the Father's holiness, as His salvation worked in Christ becomes manifest in our lives, calling us to turn away from sinful vice and fleshly passion, to live with honorable conduct, and to perform our spiritual priesthood to the glory of God. While the exhortation to moral behavior receives appropriate attention in these passages, love for others stands out as the central characteristic of a holy life.

The New Testament focuses on sanctification as the work of the Spirit of God as He brings God’s people into the full consequences of the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ. It is both “now” and “not yet,” for the gift of salvation has been given and God’s people are fully His own through faith in Christ; at the same time, they have not yet been fully re-made in the image of God. This will await the resurrection of the body and the glory of the world to come. Until then, God’s people are led by the Spirit to strive against their flesh and to “keep in step with the Spirit” in following their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

**Church Fathers**

The Early Church continued to view sanctification as involving a present gift and an imperative exhortation. At the close of the first century, Clement and his fellow presbyters in Rome wrote in such a way as to reflect both realities:

> “Seeing, therefore that we are the portion of the Holy One, let us do all those things which pertain to holiness, avoiding all evil-speaking…”

> “How blessed and wonderful, beloved are the gifts of God! Life in immortality, splendor in righteousness, truth in perfect confidence, faith in assurance, self-control in holiness! And all these fall under the cognizance of our understandings [now]; what then shall those things be which are prepared for such as wait for Him?”

In the mid-third century, Origen would connect the sanctified elements of the Holy Eucharist with the sanctification of those who partake: “But we give thanks to the Creator of all and, along with thanksgiving and prayer for the blessings we have received, we also eat the bread presented to us; and this bread becomes by prayers a sacred body, which sanctifies those who sincerely partake of it.” Thus, the “holy things for the holy people” (as the liturgy would later declare) are the very things that constitute them as holy.

A classic text from the Church Fathers on the topic of sanctification is the ninth chapter of On the Holy Spirit by St. Basil the Great. Writing against those who denied the full deity of the Holy Spirit (the pneumatomachians), Basil glorifies the Spirit for His divine character and His divine works. As essentially “Holy” and “Spirit,” He is clearly not a creature, since these are both divine ascriptions. Basil’s words deserve to be quoted at length:

> “All things thirsting for holiness turn to Him; everything living in virtue never turns away from Him. He waters them with His life-giving breath and helps them reach their proper fulfillment. He perfects all other things and Himself lacks nothing; He gives life to all things, and is never depleted . . . . He is the source of sanctification, spiritual light, who gives illumination to everyone using His powers to search for the truth — and the illumination He gives is Himself. His nature is unapproachable; only through His goodness are we able to draw near it. He fills all things with His power, but only those who are worthy may share it . . . He is shared, yet remains whole. Consider the analogy of the sunbeam: each person upon whom its kindly light falls rejoices as if the sun existed for him alone, yet it illumines land and sea and is master of the atmosphere. In the same way, the Spirit is given to each one who receives Him as if He were the possession of that person alone, yet He sends forth sufficient grace to fill all the universe. Everything that partakes of His grace is filled with joy according to its capacity — the capacity of its nature, not of His power.”

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7 St. Basil the Great, On the Holy Spirit, translated by David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), p. 43-44. Basil concludes this chapter with an exuberant list of the works of the Spirit in believers, including “becoming like God, and, the highest of all desires, becoming God.” Such language of theosis, considered orthodox for centuries, strikes modern western ears as strange and wrong. Historically, however, this language wished to say nothing more than what Scriptures affirm: Christians are the children of God and are being made like God (1 John 3:1–3), with characteristics such as immortality (John 11:26) and holiness. Saying we will become god or gods (sometimes with the significant qualification “as far as this is possible”) was a way of confessing that through Christ human capacity would be brought to its maximal potential. It was a maximal recognition of what the work of Christ accomplished, with the result of maximizing the praise of Christ and recognizing His work as the ultimate and unsurpassable salvation.
Even with these few examples, one can see how the Church’s reflections on sanctification deepened over time. Beginning with the explicit biblical data, that reflection came to draw connections to creation, the Sacraments, the Church and the Office of the Holy Ministry toward a deeper confession of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Participants may wish to share the names of authors and works that they have found particularly helpful in deepening their own understanding of the sanctifying work of the Spirit in our lives.

Lutheran Confessions

The Lutheran Confessions teach that the Holy Spirit sanctifies people through the Word of God by bringing them to faith in Christ. The ascended Christ Himself rules over the process of sanctifying His Church, as He sends the Holy Spirit into believers’ hearts for this very purpose (AC III 5). He works through the “instruments” of the Word and the Sacraments to effect faith (AC V 2; IX) and creates a new spiritual life “bound to bring forth good fruits” (AC VI 1), including the fruits of repentance (AC XII). The Spirit gathers the Church as a holy people (communio sanctorum) around the holy things of the Word and Sacraments (communio sanctorum) (AC VII). The believers’ holiness does not consist in church rites or traditions (AC XV).

“Our churches … condemn those who do not locate evangilical perfection in the fear of God and in faith … For the Gospel teaches an eternal righteousness of the heart (Romans 10:10). At the same time, it does not require the destruction of the civil state or the family. The Gospel very much requires that they be preserved as God’s ordinances and that love be practiced in such ordinances” (AC XVI 4–5).

Likewise, Luther states that the holiness of the Church — the flock of “holy believers” — comes “from God’s Word and true faith” (SA III XII 2-3).

The clearest definition of sanctification in the Confessions appears in Luther’s explanation to the third article in the catechisms. Here, the work is clearly attributed to the Holy Spirit working through the ministry of the Church, specifically through the Word and Sacraments. “The Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel … sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He … sanctifies the whole Christian Church” (SC II “The Third Article”). Interestingly, Luther chooses the past tense for the personal work of the Spirit (the Spirit has brought me to saving faith and made me child of God) and the present tense for His ongoing work in the Church. In the Large Catechism, Luther explains that the Holy Spirit is called holy because of His office of making us holy. The rest of the creed explains the instruments through which He works — preaching Christ to us through the Church and making us to be born again by the Word, uniting us with all believers in Christ, constantly forgiving our sins, and finally raising us into perfect and eternal holiness. Luther concludes His discussion of the creed with the beautiful summary: “He has created us for this very reason, that He might redeem and sanctify us. In addition to giving and imparting to us everything in heaven and upon earth, He has even given to us His Son and the Holy Spirit, who brings us to Himself” (LC II 64).

Luther also expounds on the means of sanctification, namely the sanctifying work of the Word of God, in His explanation to the Third Commandment. “[Sanctifying] the holy day” can only be done by being “occupied with holy words, works, and life” (LC I 87), and this can only be done by making use of the Word of God (LC I 88). Finally, for Christians this should be a daily occupation and a daily sanctifying by which we ourselves are sanctified by the working of the Spirit through the Word. “God’s Word is the treasure that sanctifies everything” (LC I 91). It “makes saints of us all” (holy, sanctified, LC I 92).

Sanctification is the work of God alone. In one sense, it is as complete as the full forgiveness granted in justification; in another sense, it is yet inchoate, complete only upon resurrection. Observe the “divine agency” along with the various descriptions of sanctification in the following citations:

“Being sprinkled by the Gospel with the blood of Christ, we may be sanctified, as those put to death and made alive” (Ap XXIV 38).

“Human nature, which is perverted and corrupted by original sin, must and can be healed only by the regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit [Titus 3:5]. However, this healing is only begun in this life. It will not be perfect until the life to come” (SD I 14).

“Scripture testifies that God cleanses, washes, and sanctifies mankind from sin [1 Corinthians 6:11; 1 John 1:7] and that Christ saves His people from their sins” (SD I 45).

God has “given you a heart to understand … eyes to see … ears to hear … He saved us … by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” He takes away “the heart of stone from their flesh and [gives] them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in [His] statutes.” He creates us “in Christ Jesus for good works as “a new creation” (SD II 26).
“In the same way, renewal and sanctification also do not belong in the article or matter of justification before God, even though it is a benefit of the Mediator, Christ, and a work of the Holy Spirit. Sanctification follows justification since, on account of our corrupt flesh, sanctification is not entirely perfect and complete in this life” (SD III 28).

“For all Christians are temples of God [1 Corinthians 3:16–17] the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who also moves them to do right” (SD III 54).

“But the Gospel teaches that our spiritual offerings are acceptable to God through faith for Christ’s sake … Because, in so far as they have been born anew according to the inner man, they do what is pleasing to God. They act not by coercion of the Law, but by the renewing of the Holy Spirit, voluntarily and spontaneously from their hearts. However, they still have a constant struggle against the old Adam” (SD VI 22-23).

The Confessors were particularly concerned to distinguish sanctification from justification so as to exclude works from justification (SD III, e.g., 28-29). Against the notion that the mass works merit for the forgiveness of sins, the Augsburg Confession points to the “once for all” death of Jesus as the singular source of sanctification (AC XXIV 26-27). The third article of the Solid Declaration makes the distinction between justification and sanctification, but refuses any interpretation which would allow for a division:

“Good works do not come before faith, neither does sanctification come before justification. First, in conversion faith is kindled in us by the Holy Spirit from the hearing of the Gospel. Faith lays hold of God’s grace in Christ, by which the person is justified. Then, when the person is justified, he is also renewed and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. From this renewal and sanctification the fruit of good works then follow. This should not be understood as though justification and renewal were separated from one another in such a way that a genuine faith sometimes could exist and continue for a time together with evil intention. Only the order <of causes and effects, of antecedents and consequents> is indicated, how one comes first or follows the other” (SD III 41).

The Confessions also envision sanctification as a process of growth, indeed of Spirit-worked progress. Thus, Luther writes, “By the Word He works and promotes sanctification, causing this congregation daily to grow and to become strong in the faith and its fruit, which He produces” (LC II 53). This passage is cited and expanded in Article II in the Solid Declaration, where we find, “the Holy Spirit … sanctifies us in the Church, and causes us to grow daily in faith and good works” (SD II 38).

How do we envision sanctification in the narrow sense of “growing in holiness”? Does the spiritual maturing progress in a linear fashion? Does it suffer stops and starts and even regressions? What comfort can we draw from the fact that “Christ is our sanctification”?

Elsewhere, Luther will simply speak of the continuous striving that must accompany sanctification in this life: “So a truly Christian life is nothing other than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever to be continued. For this must be done without ceasing, that we always keep purging away whatever belongs to the old Adam. Then what belongs to the new man may come forth” (LC IV 65). Our evaluation of our sanctification observes the many ways in which we yet fall short. The perfection of Christ’s righteousness covering us frees us from despair and gives us confidence before God.
TEACHING/PREACHING

USAGE OF THE WORD


The Law will clearly show that our own efforts to establish our holiness will fall short. The Church has known its ages, and every congregation may have its own temptations of identifying its “holiness” with certain outward works or human efforts. These can never transform the heart; they will not bring about the kind of relationship with God and with others that embodies the perfection of goodness, righteousness and love. The Law will also rightly reveal to us the divine demand for holiness. “Cheap grace,” which presumes salvation but which shows no concern for demonstrating true repentance or living the new life in Christ, leads to a spiritual apathy that finally uses the Gospel as an excuse for sin and an inoculation against the Spirit’s call to repentance. Lutherans, in particular, may fear that any emphasis on sanctification in their lives would undermine their confession of “salvation by grace alone apart from works.” Christians today who imbibe in our culture’s emphasis on egalitarianism (equality) of ideas, religions and values may shy away from decisions that challenge this cultural concept, lest their faith appear “counter-cultural.”

The Spirit of God does call Christians through the Word to change their speech, transform their habits and redirect their activities to conform with the will of God — all of which may lead to accusations that they are putting on airs or judging others. To all of this, the Law states that sanctification is not an option, but it is still not anything we ourselves can produce.

The Gospel addresses this need with the reality of sanctification already given in Christ and sanctification being worked by the Spirit. The Christian who rightly seeks to stand holy before God can rejoice in the promises that all who trust in Christ have been forgiven and are declared righteous. They are “God’s own,” for Christ’s sake. His death on the cross accomplished what we never could, and the victory means that we have been consecrated, set apart by Holy Baptism to be a “holy nation” and a “holy priesthood” (1 Peter 2). Along with the “given” of sanctification comes the “given” Spirit, who continues to strive within us to do God’s good pleasure until we have been completely remade after Christ in the resurrection of the body and the glory of the world to come. Thus, at the present time, Christians do not simply experience sanctification as one victorious set of good works and holy deeds. It entails daily repentance, clinging to Christ alone as our only hope, and rejoicing in the undeserved love He graciously lavishes upon us.

A right preaching of Law and Gospel will assist Christians in properly understanding what a sanctified life looks like as a life of love, following after Jesus Christ in our vocations, living in grace, accepting the sufferings of discipleship, and drawing strength from God’s holy Word and Sacraments. Such preaching and teaching will also motivate the hearers to become responsible participants in the Spirit’s work in their lives (1 Cor. 3:11–15). It should not be strange for us to cite the exhortation to the Hebrews, “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14, emphasis added). In so doing, Christians may, for example, seek to strengthen their use of the Means of Grace, aim to develop skills to better serve their neighbors, or look for new opportunities to confess Christ in the daily witness of their lives.

DISCUSSION

1. God provided ancient Israel with a rich culture to communicate the concept of “holiness” — washings and sprinklings, clean and unclean, priests and Levites, tabernacle and temple. Our secular culture has little contact with the idea. What images can be used to communicate holiness and sanctification today?

   One might begin with areas of which the conscience is already aware — ideas of goodness, righteousness and love. As God is the absolute of these, we recognize that we fall short. Images of dirty and clean, sickness and health, perversion and wholesomeness are still powerful. One might recall social experiences that communicated a sense of unworthiness or not belonging. Sanctification may be correlated to God’s claiming us and making us His own, cleansing, healing and restoring us. Yet this entails the consequence that we are no
longer our own. We have been “bought with a price” and, given a new identity in Christ, we now live for the one who died for us (1 Cor. 6:20; 2 Cor. 5:15).

2. In what way can fellowship in the Christian Church support our “Quest for Holiness” (to quote the famous title given the book by Adolf Köberle)? How do some Christians find that life in the Church challenges and even appears to undermine their own desire to follow Christ “in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4)?

Other Christians can provide wonderful models of discipleship, words of encouragement, a ministry of presence and prayers of intercession for us. Christ clearly calls us to live as disciples in fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Him. Nevertheless, conflicts in the church, tensions between personalities and misunderstandings between people can bring out the worst in Christ’s disciples. At such times, it is important to remember that the holiness of church consists of Christ’s alien righteousness and, at the same time, that the Spirit is at work in us to teach us to love one another, even as that sometimes means bearing our crosses together.

3. How can our church services, buildings and practices communicate a sense of holiness? Will this necessarily estrange visitors and non-Christians, or can we evidence a sense of reverence for God’s holiness that is at the same time loving, joyful and winsome?

Dedicated spaces for altar, pulpit, lectern and font mark off the central activities of God among us as “other” than ordinary. Services that communicate a sense of the presence of God among the assembly will be distinguished from merely human gatherings. Even practices such as reverential use of the elements of the Lord’s Supper will highlight how the Church has the privilege of standing among holy things. Thus, traditional practices such as reverencing the altar, wearing vestments and lighting candles have endeavored to communicate the unique activity of worshiping the holy God. Participants will possibly disagree about the degree to which such traditional expressions of the holiness can serve as a faithful witness to the Gospel in their own particular ministry contexts.

4. To what degree do we use ritual to “set apart” objects for use in the church or use by God (vestments, paraments, vessels, the church building itself, blessing of blankets and prayer shawls)? How can such rites be helpful? Can they give the wrong message?

When we “dedicate” or “consecrate” objects, we set them apart for God’s use and recognize that what we give to Him is no longer our own. It is for His particular use. Sometimes, however, it appears that superstition may be joined with such “consecrations,” for example, when prayer shawls are said to provide a particular blessing or perhaps even healing power to hospital patients without respect to God’s particular will for them.

**SUMMARY**

Sanctification is a gift, the effect of Christ’s work of salvation for us. Christ consecrated Himself that we would be consecrated. Nothing could make us holier than what has already made us holy: the sacrifice of Christ on the cross for us. We are so surely “God’s own” that His very Spirit has taken up residence within us as a deposit guaranteeing our final glorification with Christ. For now, our holiness is hidden, but by faith we rejoice in the alien righteousness, which is our right standing with God.

Sanctification also means living as a Christian. It is a life led by the Spirit and following Christ to the glory of the Father. It is the fullness of life, the “abundant life” that Christ came to give us, a life of love, faithfulness and joy. As the Spirit empowers us to produce the fruit of the Spirit and exercise our own spiritual gifts, He works even more deeply to transform us into the likeness of Christ. As St. Paul writes, “We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). It is a transformation that begins with the word of the Gospel first planted in our hearts and continues until we reach the glory that Christ would share with us.
Blessed
More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
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LEADER’S GUIDE

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FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

What does it mean to be blessed?

In common usage, “blessed” refers both to a situation and a feeling — a situation of some abundant earthly gain as well as the resulting feeling of happiness. In ancient Greek times, to be blessed meant to enjoy a life free from daily cares or worries. It was a condition reserved for the wealthy and powerful.¹ In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount (LW 21), Luther wrote that the Jewish leaders in Jesus’ day defined “blessed” as being successful, rich and powerful. He warned his readers, “This is still what the world believes today.”² In our day as well, a blessed life is understood to be a life filled with good things — earthly prosperity and happiness. The questions “Am I blessed?” and “Am I wealthy?” and “Am I happy?” are inextricably linked.

But if being happy is all that blessed means, we are quickly frustrated. Happiness is elusive. The root word of “happy” is “hap,” the Middle English word for “luck.” Other words from this root include “happen,” “happenstance” and “haphazard.” Happiness, in the world’s experience, is largely a matter of chance. It depends on the roll of the dice. Blessedness, when it is dependent on happenstance, rises and falls haphazardly.

1. What are the spiritual dangers of understanding “blessed” solely in terms of happiness?
2. When someone says to you, “I am so blessed,” to what kinds of things are they usually referring? Who is credited with the blessing?
3. If a fellow pastor says “We are so blessed!” in reference to his church, what things might he be referring to?

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

Understanding “blessed” in the Scriptures is complicated by the fact that “blessed” translates as multiple words in Hebrew and Greek.³

“Blessed” in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the words בָרָךְ (berakah) and עשֶר (ashre) are both commonly translated as “blessed,” but the concepts are distinct from one another.

Berakah

The first time “blessed” appears in the Bible is on the fifth day of creation, Gen. 1:22: “And God blessed (berakah) them [the fish and birds], saying, “Be fruitful and multiply ...” A day later, man is blessed by God to be fruitful, fill the earth, subdue it and have dominion over it. Here, “blessed” means to confer abundant and effective life. To be blessed is to be divinely enabled. God is doing more than just saying something nice about someone; He is actually bestowing and enabling His good gifts. God is always the source of this blessing, though it is sometimes pronounced through a human agent.

The same Hebrew word also means to bend the knee, as when paying homage or receiving a blessing. Berakah, therefore, can refer to man’s action of praise to God. Having received God’s blessing, man responds by blessing (praising and thanking) God. For example, in Gen. 9:1, God blessed Noah and his sons, to which Noah responds in Gen. 9:26 by blessing God with praise and thanksgiving.

Divine Service, Setting Three closes with both uses of this word. Based on Ps. 103:1, we say, “Bless (barak) we the Lord,” which means, “Thanks be to God.” This is followed by the Aaronic benediction of Num. 6:24–26, “The Lord bless (barak) you.”

1. What divine gift or enablement is bestowed by God with the word “blessed” (barak) in the following passages?
   - Gen. 12:1–3
   - Job 42:12–13
   - Is. 61:8–10
   - Num. 6:23–27
God’s blessings in this benediction include His “keeping” or protection (v. 24), His face shining with grace upon us (v. 25), and His face (or countenance) lifted in favor and peace toward us (v. 26). By these blessings His people are marked with His name as belonging to Him (v. 27).

Ashre
The other Old Testament word often translated as “blessed” is *ashre*, the plural construct of asher, which is defined as “go straight,” “pronounce happy,” “call blessed.” One who is *ashre* is declared to be in good circumstances, lined up straightly with the will of God, on the right track, praise-worthy. *Ashre* is never applied to God, only to people.

2. What circumstances are called *ashre* in the following passages? Is the word referring to the emotional state of the person, or to the God-given status of the person (or to both)? Is a person always happy when he is *ashre*?

- Gen. 30:9–13
  > v. 13: “Happy (ashre) am I! For women have called me happy.”
- Deut. 33:29
  > “Happy (ashre) are you, O Israel!” The focus is not solely on the person’s emotional state; it is on the person’s happy or positive circumstances. Moses declared the Israelites happy because they were in favorable circumstances, “a people saved by the Lord, the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph!”
- Ps. 1:1–2
  > Preface to the Large Catechism: “Psalm 1 calls those blessed who ‘meditate on God’s law day and night.’ You will never offer up any incense or other savor more potent against the devil than to occupy yourself with God’s commandments and words and to speak, sing, and meditate on them. This, indeed, is the true holy water, the sign which routs the devil and puts him to flight. Time and paper would fail me if I were to recount all blessings that flow from God’s Word.”
- Ps. 32:1–2
  > “Blessed (ashre) is the one whose transgression is forgiven…” Compare Rom. 4:5–8, where Paul defines the blessedness of Ps. 32 as that of “the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works.”
- Ps. 94:12
  > “Blessed (ashre) is the man whom you discipline, O Lord.” Even a man being disciplined by God can be declared ashre, “blessed.” Though we may not be happy about it at the time, God’s discipline is still blessed, a happy circumstance. Heb. 12:6: “For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”

“Blessed” in the New Testament
The New Testament also has two words translated as “blessed.”

Eulogeó
The Septuagint uses various forms of εὐλογέω (eulogeó) to translate the Hebrew barak, and it functions similarly. Eulogeó is used both for God blessing us (giving us His divine enablement, bestowing His gifts) and our blessing of God (praising and thanking Him). The English word “eulogy” is derived from this word, referring to “good speech,” the saying of good things about someone.

In Eph. 1:3, both meanings of the word are used. “Blessed (eulogetos — “praise, thanks”) be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed (eulogesas — given good things to) us in Christ with every spiritual blessing (eulogia) in the heavenly places.”

3. What divine gift or enablement is bestowed by God with the word “blessed” (eulogetos) in these passages?

- Luke 1:41–42
- Matt. 25:31–34

Makarios
The other New Testament word translated as “blessed” is ἐυακαρίως (makarios). The Septuagint uses makarios to translate the Hebrew word asher. Makarios is defined as “fortunate, privileged, happy because of circumstances.” As noted in the above introduction, in ancient Greek, makarios referred to people whose riches and power gave them freedom from the cares and worries of life. Having more than enough material wealth, the makarios (blessed, happy) could sit back and enjoy fullness of life.

But in the New Testament as a whole, makarios is more than just happiness resulting from positive, prosperous circumstances. It refers to the distinctive religious joy given to those who share in the reign of heaven, in which they know the joy of God’s forgiveness, life and salvation. One can have this blessedness even in the midst of difficulty or suffering.

The primary example of this is the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus pronounces His children to be makarios. He declares them to be favored by God, in a positive, happy status before God. But the earthly circumstances in which this “distinctive religious joy” is given and received are not necessarily positive. Jesus declares makarios those who are

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“poor in spirit,” “those who mourn,” “the persecuted,” etc. Contrary to the world’s view, Jesus does not declare “blessed” those who are already filled with good things. He declares “blessed” those who are spiritually empty, those who in repentance and faith in Jesus have left behind their reliance on the things, abilities or achievements of this world and are made able to receive the gifts of His kingdom. According to Jesus, the blessed are the empty!

4. Consider the following examples of people blessed by Jesus. How were they empty? How were they blessed by Jesus? How did they respond?
   - Matt. 8:5–13
   - Matt. 15:21–28
   - Matt. 16:13–19
   - Luke 1:46–49

5. On the other hand, some were so filled up with merits, abilities and achievements that they had no room for Jesus’ blessing.
   - John 8:31–38

**Blessed Are the Empty**

“Blessed” usually means being filled up with good things and the happiness that results. However, as explained above, in Jesus’ kingdom, it is the empty who are blessed — the poor, the persecuted, the mourning.

On the necessity of this emptiness, Martin Franzmann wrote, “Only such as have become a vacuum for God to fill are capable of the life here described.” And, “Only a man who knows he has nothing and sees and seeks in God everything can be a recipient of the Kingdom.”

In other words, when it comes to rightness with God, it is a great blessing to be empty of one’s own merit, ability or achievement. As Dr. Norman Nagel wrote, “Calvary is for you, from him, a gift. Blessed are those who are given to. They are ‘the poor in spirit’ of the first beatitude. … His giving to them is not blocked or hindered by what they have crammed together and would use for bargaining. ‘God gives into empty hands,’ says Augustine, not into hands full of what we would boast of before God. There is no room for the gifts to be given into. Sometimes, with drastic mercy, our Father empties our hands so there may be room for his gifts. Blessed are those who are given to by God.”

Dr. Jeff Gibbs wrote in his commentary on Matthew, “The reign of heaven belongs to those who have no spiritual resources of their own, to the lost, to the sinners. Because of this, Jesus pronounces them ‘blessed’!”

6. Dr. Nagel: “Sometimes, with drastic mercy, our Father empties our hands so there may be room for his gifts.” What methods might God use to empty us in preparation for His gifts?

7. How is Paul being emptied in Rom. 7:15–25?

8. In light of the blessedness of emptiness, how does our view of weakness and suffering differ from the world’s? See 2 Cor. 12:7–10.

To summarize the uses of “blessed” in both Old and New Testaments:
   - “Blessed” (barak/eulogetos) refers to God’s divine enablement, His bestowal upon us of His gifts. The same word group can refer to our response of praise and thanksgiving to God.
   - “Blessed” (ashre/makarios) refers to the positive, happy circumstances of those declared to be in line with God’s will.

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CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND
UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

In the confessions, to be blessed is to be empty of our own abilities and resources while receiving both temporal and spiritual gifts from God.

In the Large Catechism’s explanation of the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, to be blessed is to have earthly life and all that supports it as an undeserved gift from our Creator. “[God] gives us all these things so that we may sense and see in them his fatherly heart and his boundless love toward us. Thus our hearts will be warmed and kindled with gratitude to God and a desire to use all these blessings to his glory and praise.”

In the explanation of the Second Article, we are blessed by virtue of the undeserved mercy of God, according to which Jesus has redeemed us from sin, death and the devil by His death and resurrection for us. Again, we contribute nothing but our emptiness to our redemption: “He has snatched us, poor lost creatures, from the jaws of hell, won us, made us free, and restored us to the Father’s favor and grace. He has taken us as his own, under his protection, in order that he may rule us by his righteousness, wisdom, power, life, and blessedness.”

Unbelievers are blessed by God as well. Article IV of the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord states, “Works which belong to the maintenance of outward discipline and which unbelievers and the unconverted are also able and required to perform, are indeed praiseworthy in the sight of the world, even God will reward them with temporal blessings in this world.” However, the Small Catechism explains that only believers recognize God as the source of blessing and respond by blessing Him with thanks and praise.

TEACHING/PREACHING
USAGE OF "BLESSED"

Consider this quotation from Luther’s Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount (LW 21):

“Christ opens His mouth here and says that something is necessary other than the possession of enough on earth; as if He were to say: ‘My dear disciples, when you come to preach among the people, you will find out that this is their teaching and belief: ‘Whoever is rich or powerful is completely blessed; on the other hand, whoever is poor and miserable is rejected and condemned before God.’ The Jews were firmly persuaded that if a man was successful, this was a sign that he had a gracious God, and vice versa. The reason for this was the fact that they had many great promises from God regarding the temporal, physical goods that He would grant to the pious. They counted upon these, in the opinion that if they had this, they were right with Him. …

“At the outset, therefore, it was necessary for His sermon to overthrow this delusion and to tear it out of their hearts as one of the greatest obstacles to faith and a great support for the idol Mammon in their heart. Such a doctrine could have no other consequence than to make people greedy, so that everyone would be interested only in amassing plenty and in having a good time, without need or trouble. And everyone would have to conclude: ‘If that man is blessed who succeeds and has plenty, I must see to it that I do not fall behind.’

“This is still what the whole world believes today, especially the Turks, who draw their reliance and strength from it, coming to the conclusion that they could not have had so much success and victory if they had not been the people of God to whom He was

8 Tappert, The Book of Concord, 413.
9 Ibid., 414.
10 Ibid., 415.
11 Ibid., 552.
12 Ibid., 347.
gracious in preference to all others. Among us, too, the whole papacy believes this. Their doctrine and life are founded only upon their having enough; and therefore they have assembled all the goods of the world, as everyone can see. In short, this is the greatest and most universal belief or religion on earth. On it all men depend according to their flesh and blood, and they cannot regard anything else as blessedness. That is why He preaches a totally new sermon here for the Christians: If they are a failure, if they have to suffer poverty and do without riches, power, honor, and good days, they will still be blessed and have not a temporal reward, but a different, eternal one; they will have enough in the kingdom of heaven.”

1. According to the examples given by Luther, how are Law and Gospel sometimes confused by those who preach on the blessing of God?

2. In the above quotation, how is “blessed” defined according to a theology of glory? On the other hand, how is “blessed” defined according to the theology of the cross?

3. “Whoever is rich or powerful is completely blessed; on the other hand, whoever is poor and miserable is rejected and condemned before God.” In what ways is this message still preached today in popular media? In Christian churches? Why is it so tempting to preach this message? Why is it dangerous?

4. According to Luther, the Turks conclude that “they could not have had so much success and victory if they had not been the people of God to whom He was gracious in preference to all others.” In our day, what groups make similar conclusions?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In his commentary on Rom. 4:6–7 (LW 25), Luther wrote, “So also David pronounces, that is, affirms or declares, that there is no other blessedness of man except the blessedness of a man, by which he is blessed before God and by God, namely, the blessedness of that man alone to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works, that is, without the aid and cooperation of works, or to men who are undeserving. Blessed are those … who do not think that they have no sin, or if they have it, do not believe that they are made righteous by their own works.”

What is Luther’s definition of blessedness? What obstacles keep us from knowing this blessedness?

2. How is infant Baptism an illustration of “Blessed are the empty”?

Dr. Jeff Gibbs writes in his Concordia Commentary on Matthew: “The Baptism of a helpless infant is a perfect illustration of the first and the third Beatitudes. Such little ones are “poor in spirit” and “lowly,” but in their Baptism, Jesus gives them the present blessings of his reign and promises to them that they will inherit the earth.”

3. Consider Franzmann’s definition of an “empty” (therefore, blessed) pastor:

“The Christian preacher remains ever a beggar before God, and all pretentious tinsel of ‘pulpit oratory’ must be swept away by the beggarly simplicity of: ‘Lord, open Thou my lips that my mouth may show forth Thy praise.’ And the health and life of the Church depends upon her beggary, on her remaining conscious of the sola gratia, sola fide. For this beggary, though it leaves no room for personal pride and no room for personal glory, does leave full room for God and for His kingdom, for His sovereignly redemptive sway, and so leaves room for a glory that surpasseth.”


SUMMARY

In the sermon referenced above, Dr. Norman Nagel wrote: “In the Gospel, this word blessed is always in relation to Jesus. It rings with gladness, as is pointed to by the translation that says, ‘Happy are those who know their need of God.’ But happiness is often something so fleeting or shallow, and here is something from our Lord, a lively, joyful gift for all our living and all our dying. Not spoonfuls, not bucketfuls, but the ‘river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb’ (Rev. 22:1). ‘And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace’ (John 1:16).”