

The Festival of Ash Wednesday (Observed)
21 February 2010
Concordia Lutheran Mission
Terrebonne, Oregon

“Christians Store up Eternal Treasures in Heaven through Absolution and Faith, namely, the Liturgy, the Gospel.”

“But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal”

St. Matthew 6:20

Introduction

How do we store up treasures in heaven? Well, first we have to find out where heaven is in order to store up treasures. So, where is heaven? Heaven is where ever we have the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Obviously, if we have the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, then Heaven is open to us and through our labors of faith we will be storing up treasures there because we are inhabitants of heaven.

The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven are Christ’s Word and Sacraments. The Word and the Sacraments are the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven because they forgive sins. Sin is what closes heaven to men. The forgiveness of sins is what opens heaven to men. The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, therefore, are Christ’s Word and Sacraments.¹

And Christians walk through and enter heaven through faith. And living and toiling in the Kingdom of Heaven by faith, Christians produce the fruits of faith. And the fruits of faith produce the rewards of faith (or grace) because our Heavenly Father rewards the works produced by faith.

Christians then store up eternal treasures in heaven through absolution and faith by the Word and the Sacraments, the Gospel.

¹“[T]he ‘keys of the Kingdom of Heaven’ are nothing else, and can be nothing else, than the means of grace, the Gospel. Through the offer of the Gospel, and through nothing else, Christians remit sins and thus open heaven; through withholding the Gospel, they retain sins and thus lock heaven. Now, since the believers are the person to whom Christ has entrusted the means of grace, they have ... been given the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, p. 453.

I. Sin Produces a Bitter and Disappointing Reward and Not Treasures.

A. Christ is for treasures that endure.

This Wednesday past was the Festival of Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Lent is a season of repentance and Ash Wednesday reminds us of repentance with its “ashes”. The Rev. Dr. James L. Brauer writes:

Other customs may be used, particularly the imposition of ashes on those who wish it. This ancient act is a gesture of repentance and a powerful reminder about the meaning of the day. Ashes can symbolize dust-to-dustness and remind worshippers of the need for cleansing, scrubbing and purifying.²

The “dust-to-dustness”, of course, refers to the fruit of the fall of man into sin. Moses writes:

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed *is* the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat *of* it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.³

But that is not the end of it. If that’s all the point were, then we might as well pack it in, go home, and never return to Church again. The ashes remind us of our predicament so God can turn us to His deliverance from that predicament: The Gospel. *For this reason, while Lent, to be sure, is a season of repentance, that repentance is only supposed to lead us again and again to refreshment in the Gospel.* Dr. Brauer writes:

Weekday services in Lent should focus on the deepening of faith, refreshment for the spirit and on the striving for the obedience of discipleship.⁴

Consequently, Jesus speaks of something truly refreshing and joyful in today’s Gospel: The Kingdom of Heaven and the treasures for us therein.

²*Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, p. 166.

³**Genesis 3:17-19.**

⁴*Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, p. 167.

But doesn't Lent remind us of austerity and denial? Doesn't Lent remind us that Christ is against accumulating treasures? Hardly, as we have just seen from Jesus' own words, Jesus is in favor of accumulating treasure. Rather, Christ is against Christians accumulating treasures that don't endure, namely, the treasure produced by the fruits of unbelief. Jesus says:

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal ...⁵

Clearly, Jesus is for storing up treasures, but only those that will endure.

B. Sin and unbelief produce a bitter reward.

Sin and unbelief, however, produce a bitter reward. As we have seen with Adam, sin and unbelief reduced him to the dust of the ground. Adam disobeyed God's Word in unbelief, assuming God would not keep His Word to reward sin with death. And his unbelief produced the bitter reward of returning to the dust of the ground. Luther writes:

These actions dare not be regarded lightly; for they are, as the saying is, causes pregnant with punishments which we endure, such an awful condition of sin and such an awful antipathy to God. We ought to look at and think about these, instead of confining ourselves to the fruit that was plucked and swallowed. Those who look only at the action and not the sin from which this action followed cannot do otherwise than charge God with cruelty that because of so small a sin He has inflicted such great punishment on the entire human race. Therefore they hate God and despair; or, like the Epicureans, they laugh at this as a fairy tale.

Thus we must pay attention to the Word. Moreover, this is God's Word. And so, just as important as the Word is, so important also is the sin which is committed against the Word. To this sin our entire nature has succumbed. How could it overcome this sin, since its magnitude is inexhaustible? To overcome this sin, we need Him who brings with Him inexhaustible righteousness, that is, the Son of God.

... Therefore the root and source of sin is unbelief and turning away from God, just as on the other hand, the source and root of righteousness is faith.⁶

Another aspect of this bitter reward is that men are separated from their earthly gifts even before their earthly gifts perish because they perish in unbelief. Jesus says:

And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do,

⁵**St. Matthew 5:20.**

⁶*Luther's Works*, Vol. 1, p. 162.

because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, *and* be merry. But God said unto him, *Thou* fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So *is* he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.⁷

Luther writes:

Thus he lost the real treasure; and he had to surrender the property he had accumulated, and surrender it so pitifully that he did not even know who would get it.⁸

So, Solomon laments also this bitter reward:

Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise *man* or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This *is* also vanity.⁹

And so the treasures reaped in this life bear the stamp of impermanence and vanity because of sin. Luther writes:

You see, that is why Christ begins now to preach many words against the great idol Mammon, drawing a most ugly kind of picture of him to put people on their guard against him. The first thing He says is: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust corrupt and where thieves break in and steal.” The treasures on earth He assigns to three trustees – rust, moths, and thieves. These are miserable watchmen to put in charge of treasures! But God has wisely ordained that wherever there is a treasure, there must be such fellows to watch it, just as there are usually sparrows or rats or mice near the grain. And that is just what we deserve; for we do not use our money and property rightly, and in our miserable greed we scrape up everything for ourselves, while no one

⁷**St. Luke 12:16-21.**

⁸*Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, p. 174.

⁹**Ecclesiastes 2:18-19.**

gives or grants anything to anyone else. ... Now you see what fine god Mammon is. The best guards and courtiers he can assemble are moths and rust.¹⁰

Sin, then, yields a bitter reward, namely, loss of all our treasure and loss of our eternal souls. The prophet Hosea writes:

For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind¹¹

II. Christians Store Up Eternal Treasures through the Gospel.

A. The Kingdom of Heaven is wherever the Gospel is.

But Christ teaches us to store up treasures in heaven. But where is heaven that we should go there and store up treasures there? Heaven is wherever we have the Gospel, for the Gospel opens heaven to us. Jesus says:

And I will give unto the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.¹²

Again, Jesus says:

Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; *and* whose soever *sins* ye retain, they are retained.¹³

And the Gospel opens heaven to us, as Jesus just said, because the Gospel forgives sins. Sin closes heaven to men; the remission of sins opens heaven to men.

We also see this same forgiveness of sins that opens heaven to us in Holy Baptism. St. Peter says in his Pentecost sermon:

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.¹⁴

¹⁰*Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, pp. 168, 169.

¹¹**Hosea 8:7.**

¹²**St. Matthew 16:19.**

¹³**St. John 20:22, 23.**

¹⁴**Acts 2:38.**

Likewise, we also see the forgiveness of the Gospel in the Holy Communion. Jesus says:

For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.¹⁵

Because the Word and the Sacraments forgive sins, they are called the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. In Catechism we learned:

What is the Office of the Keys? It is the peculiar church power which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of penitent sinners, but to retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent. Where is this written? Thus writes the holy Evangelist John, chapter twentieth: The Lord Jesus breathed on His disciples and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.¹⁶

And the Keys forgive sins because they deliver to us the benefit of Christ's work on the Cross to atone for our sins. St. Paul says of Holy Baptism:

... Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word ...¹⁷

Luther writes of Holy Baptism conveying the benefits of the Cross of Christ to us:

[H]oly baptism was purchased for us through this same blood, which was shed for us and with which he paid for sin. This blood and its merit and power he put into baptism, in order that in baptism we might receive it. For whenever a person receives baptism in faith this is the same as if he were visibly washed and cleansed with the blood of Christ. For we do not attain the forgiveness of sins through our work, but rather through the death and the shedding of the blood of the Son of God. *But he takes this forgiveness of sin and tucks it into baptism.*¹⁸

The Kingdom of Heaven, then, is wherever the Gospel is because the Gospel opens heaven to sinners through the remission of sins of the Cross of Christ.

¹⁵**St. Matthew 26:28.**

¹⁶*The Small Catechism*, p. 18.

¹⁷**Ephesians 5:25, 26.**

¹⁸*Luther's Works*, Vol. 51, p. 325.

B. Christians enter the Kingdom of Heaven by faith and produce enduring fruits of faith because they are produced in heaven.

And Christians step through the portal of heaven of the Gospel and enter heaven by faith. St. Paul says:

For we walk by faith and not by sight.¹⁹

Luther writes:

... both God and Christ are not far away but near, and it is only a matter of revealing themselves ...²⁰

Again, Luther writes:

Now Christians see heaven opened, always hear God the heavenly Father conversing with them, and behold the dear angels continuously ascending and descending upon us. The Heavenly Father still addresses these words to us: "This is My beloved Son!" He will continue to do so until the Day of Judgment, nor will heaven ever be closed again. When you are baptized, partake of Holy Communion, receive the absolution, or listen to a sermon, heaven is open, and we hear the voice of the Heavenly Father; all these works descend upon us from the open heaven above us. God converses with us, governs us, provides for us; and Christ hovers over us.²¹

And entering heaven by the Gospel through faith, all our works proceeding from faith in this life actually occur in heaven. St. Paul writes:

For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.²²

The Lutheran Church confesses regarding faith and its produce of great works:

Therefore, of works that are truly good and well-pleasing to God, which God will reward in this world and in the world to come, *faith* must be the mother

¹⁹**II Corinthians 5:7.**

²⁰*Luther's Works*, Vol. 37, p. 66.

²¹*Luther's Works*, Vol. 22, p. 202.

²²**Philippians 3:20.**

and source; and on this account they are called by St. Paul true *fruits of faith*, as also of the *of the Spirit*. For, as Dr. Luther writes in the Preface to St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans: *Thus faith is a divine work in us, that changes us and regenerates us of God, and puts to death the old Adam, makes us entirely different men in heart, spirit, mind, and all powers, and brings with it [confers] the Holy Ghost. Oh, it is a living, busy, active, powerful thing that we have in faith, so that it is impossible for it not to do good without ceasing. Nor does it ask whether good works are to be done; but before the question is asked, it has wrought them, and is always engaged in doing them. But he who does not do such works is void of faith, and gropes and looks about after faith and good works, and knows neither what faith nor what good works are, yet babbles and prates with many words concerning faith and good works. [Justifying] faith is a living, bold [firm] trust in God's grace, so certain that a man would die a thousand times for it [rather than suffer this trust to be wrested from him]. And this trust and knowledge of divine grace renders joyful, fearless, and cheerful toward God and all creatures, which [joy and cheerfulness] the Holy Ghost works through faith; and on account of this, man becomes ready and cheerful, without coercion, to do good to every one, and to suffer everything for love and praise to God, who has conferred this grace on him, so that it is impossible to separate works from faith, yea, just as impossible as it is for heat and light to be separated from fire.*²³

And because these good works produced by faith please a Great Person, namely, the Almighty and Eternal God, then these works are great and reap great reward.²⁴ The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper writes:

Scripture teaches that the good works of Christians receive a reward (I Cor. 3:8), yea, a very great reward ([great wage] – Matt. 5:12; Luke 6:23, 35). ... God rewards the good works of Christians here in time and, particularly, in eternity (1 Tim. 4:8; Luke 14:14). “The world hath not the grace,” says Luther, to appreciate and reward the good works of Christians, e.g. their preaching of the Gospel in the world, their prayers, their intercessions. ... The world hates and persecutes

²³*The Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration.9-12, Triglotta, p. 941.*

²⁴Even mundane daily things like eating and drinking are pleasing to God through faith: “In everything we do or experience we should have a happy heart and know that for Christ's sake we are in grace and that everything we do pleases God, even the fact that out of the needs of the body we eat and drink and do our work. Thus our hearts should remain pure in the eternal and sound knowledge of God and in trust toward God through Christ, and it should believe that everything we are pleases God, not because of some merit or worthiness of ours, which is all polluted, but because of the gift of faith, that we believe in Christ.” *Luther's Works*, Vol. 12, p. 379.

Christians just because of their very best works. ... but our gracious God makes up for that. He is so pleased with our good works that He rewards us richly for doing them. ... But this reward, so Scripture further instructs us, must be regarded strictly as a reward of grace.²⁵

And because these great rewards and treasures of grace are produced in the eternal Kingdom of Heaven, then they do not perish but abide forever. St. John the Apostle writes:

And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, said the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours and their works do follow them.²⁶

Jesus says:

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal ...²⁷

Conclusion

Christ is not against treasure; He's only against treasure that does not endure. The treasures that do not endure are the treasures of unbelief.

The treasures that endure are the treasures of faith. Faith produces eternally enduring treasures because the works of faith are produced in an eternal kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven.

And we enter the Kingdom of Heaven through faith by the portal of the Gospel. For the Gospel bestows upon us the favor of God won for us on the Cross and all the treasures therein, including the remission of sins, saving faith, the rewards of grace and the fruit of faith, the treasures of heaven, the life everlasting, and the resurrection of the body.

Amen.

²⁵*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, p. 52.

²⁶**Revelation 14:13.**

²⁷**St. Matthew 6:20.**