

Lent Vespers 3
10 March 2013
Concordia Lutheran Mission
Terrebonne, Oregon

“The Gospel Saves because the Gospel is God’s Truth of Absolution.”

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

St. John 17:17

Introduction

How can God’s Word sanctify, i.e. make men holy? How can mere syllables absolve men of what makes them unholy, namely, their sin, and, thereby, make them holy? Well, how can God’s Word do anything? After all, God’s Word created and to this moment sustains all of creation.¹ Certainly God’s Word can re-create through sanctifying sinners.²

¹“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him; and without him was not anything made that was made.” **St. John 1:1-3**. “Who being the brightness of *his* glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high” **Hebrews 1:3**.

²“Therefore if any man *be* in Christ, *he is* a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” **II Corinthians 5:17**.

“By way of illustration, as God brought forth heaven and earth through the Word, that is, through Him, even so He, too, performed all that He wished by uttering a word. For instance: ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise’ (Mark 5:41); and: ‘Young man, I say to you, arise’ (Luke 7:14); and: ‘Lazarus, come out!’ (John 11:43); and to the paralytic: ‘Rise, take up your bed and go home, be delivered of your sickness’ (Matt. 9:6); and to the lepers: ‘Be clean!’ (Matt. 8:3; Luke 17:14). In a similar way He fed 5,000 men with five loaves of bread and two fish, prompting those who witnessed this miracle to say: ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world’ (John 6:14). When a great storm arose on the sea and the Lord rebuked the winds and the sea, all those in His ship marveled, saying: ‘What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey Him?’ (Matt. 8:27). With His words He also exorcized the evil spirits. All this He could accomplish with a single word.” Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 22, p. 144.

This fact is truth, Jesus says. In the first place, God's Word became man to become our High Priest to intercede and atone for the sins of men with His own Death and Resurrection for us. That idea is not a theory nor wishful thinking, but a fact, the Truth, and a Blessed Truth because He is full of "Grace and Truth"³.

Finally, God communicates to men This Blessed Sanctification of the Cross through the preaching of the Truth, God's Word, the Gospel. Again, this teaching is not a theory, an opinion, nor wishful thinking, but, as Jesus says, the Truth. God's Word the Gospel sanctifies because God's Word is All Powerful to absolve of sin, sanctify, and save.

The Gospel saves men because It is God's Almighty Word and Promise to absolve of sin, sanctify, and save. And that is, as Christ says, not theory nor wishful thinking, but the Blessed, Saving Truth.

I. Christ, Our High Priest, Sanctifies Sinners by Atoning for their Un-sanctity Sin.

A. Satan's un-truth led to man's losing his sanctification and perishing.

Truth does matter because an un-truth cost man life eternal. Put another way, a falsehood and a lie cost man his eternal soul and fathered him into death. Jesus speaks of this first lie and its catastrophic results:

Ye are of *your* father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.⁴

And so Satan fathered all men into death through his un-truth, lies, and false doctrine. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.⁵

³**St. John 1:14.**

⁴**St. John 8:44.**

⁵**Romans 5:12.**

B. God's Word becomes flesh and is full of Grace and Truth to atone for sins and sanctify.

But does man's turning up his nose up at the Truth of God's Word render Truth irrelevant, meaningless, and powerless, to men? Certainly not. For in the first place, we see that God's Truth was vindicated because man was reduced to ashes and dust by it when he opposed it.⁶ *God was right; man was wrong.*

Finally, God vanquished the un-truths of the devil with the Truth of His Grace in the Incarnation of His Son. The Apostle St. John writes:

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.⁷

Unlike man who multiplies falsehoods to cure maladies brought on by his un-truths, God remedies the situation through truth. God could simply have consigned man to eternal flames of woe for his sin. That remedy would have been the truth and it would have been justice.

But God, thankfully, remedies man's sin through the Truth of His Grace. God became man in Jesus Christ in order to fulfill the Truth of God's Grace. In the first place, Christ clearly did not avoid the Truth but, by His life of obedience, fulfilled the Truth in every respect and at every moment. Jesus says:

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.⁸

The Law says we are supposed to love God and neighbor perfectly. The Apostle St. Matthew writes:

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second *is* like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.⁹

Solomon writes in **Ecclesiastes**:

⁶“... for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.” **Genesis 3:19.**

⁷**St. John 1:14.**

⁸**St. Matthew 5:17.**

⁹**St. Matthew 22:37-40.**

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this *is* the whole *duty* of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether *it be* good, or whether *it be* evil.¹⁰

Men scoff at the whole notion of righteousness – especially in our day – and keeping the commandments. “No one can keep the commandments,” they say; but they only say this because **A.** they know in their hearts, their conscience¹¹, they are supposed to, and **B.** they haven’t and are completely unable to do so. And Christ coming and asserting that man should keep God’s commandments followed by Christ putting His money where His mouth is and doing just that only adds salt to men’s wounds for failing to keep the commandments.

But God did not become man in order to rub men’s noses in it and condemn man; God needn’t go to all that trouble to condemn man. All He need do is pass judgment on man outright and condemn him. Instead, God became man in order to fulfill that which we could not do: *fulfill God’s commandments*. God became man in order to carry out the obligations perfectly that we had transgressed in every respect.

Christ says, He came to fulfill the law and the prophets; and that He did. Whereas we are supposed to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind, but would not and now cannot, Christ Our Savior loved the Lord Our God with all of His Blessed Heart, and with all of His Righteous Mind, and with all of His Pure Soul, and with all of His Almighty Strength; and He loved His neighbor as Himself. This Blessed Work is called Christ’s *Active Obedience*, His, as Christ says, “fulfilling the law and the prophets”. The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper writes:

This teaching of Scripture [of Christ’s *Active Obedience*] is of great practical importance. In his life of faith the Christian continually resorts to Christ’s vicarious fulfillment of the Law. Luther: “He satisfied the Law; He fulfilled the Law perfectly, for He loved God with all His heart, and with all His soul, and with all His strength, and with all His mind, and He loved His neighbor as Himself. Therefore, when the Law comes and accuses you of not having kept it,

¹⁰**Ecclesiastes 12:13-14.**

¹¹Man’s conscience is God’s commandments written on the heart. “For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and *their* thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another ...” **Romans 2:14-15.**

bid it go to Christ. Say: There is the Man who has kept it; He fulfilled it for me and gave His fulfillment to me. Thus the Law is silenced.”¹²

Now in Christ, we have loved God and our neighbor perfectly and all righteousness is fulfilled on earth.¹³

Likewise, Christ also fulfilled the Law by suffering the consequences for not fulfilling the Law by dying for our sin upon the Cross (*Passive Obedience*¹⁴). The Apostle St. Paul writes:

For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures ...¹⁵

Christ, then, sanctified men not by abandoning righteousness – as men are wont in our day – or sweeping sin under the carpet, but fulfilled all righteousness and truth right down to the last jot and tittle for us. Jesus says:

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.¹⁶

II. Christ, Our High Priest, Sanctifies and Saves Men by the Truth of the of Absolution of All Sin.

A. Christ sanctifies men through the Truth of Absolution, i.e. through the Gospel.

And Christ Our High Priest sanctifies men through His Word. Jesus says:

Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken to you.¹⁷

¹²The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. II, p. 375, amplification in brackets added.

¹³“And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer *it to be so* now: for it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.” **St. Matthew 3:15.**

¹⁴“As my *Priest*, Christ *fulfilled the Law* in my stead perfectly (active obedience), *sacrificed Himself* for me (passive obedience), and still *intercedes* (pleads) for me with His heavenly Father.” *The Small Catechism*, question 132 B, p. 108.

¹⁵**I Corinthians 15:3.**

¹⁶**St. Matthew 5:17-18.**

Here Christ states plainly that His Word makes clean or sanctifies. But how does His Word sanctify? Christ's Word sanctifies because it conveys to men the Absolution He won for them on the Cross. The Apostle St. John writes:

Then said Jesus to them again, Peace *be* unto you: as *my* Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this he breathed on *them* and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost; Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; *and* whose soever *sins* ye retain, they are retained.¹⁸

The Lutheran Church confesses:

For neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe on Him, and obtain Him for our Lord, unless it were offered to us and granted to our hearts by the Holy Ghost through the preaching of the gospel. The work is done and accomplished; for Christ has acquired and gained the treasure for us by His suffering, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained concealed so that no one knew of it, then it would be in vain and lost. That this treasure, therefore, might not lie buried, but be appropriated and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to go forth and be proclaimed, in which He gives the Holy Ghost to bring this treasure home and appropriate it to us. Therefore sanctifying is nothing else than bringing us to Christ to receive this good, to which we could not attain of ourselves.¹⁹

And this Absolution through the Gospel is not wishful thinking, nor an opinion, nor a theory, but the Blessed Truth that liberates from the dreadful bondage of sin. Jesus says:

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. ... Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: *but* the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.²⁰

¹⁷**St. John 15:3**, underscore added.

¹⁸**St. John 20:21-23**.

¹⁹*The Large Catechism, Part Second, Of The Creed, Article III.38-39, Triglotta*, 689, underscore added.

²⁰**St. John 8:32, 34, 35-36**. "Christian liberty consists in this, that Christians are freed from their own will and are now servants of God (Rom. 6:22). Likewise, doctrinal liberty consists in this, that Christian teachers are freed from human opinions and bound only by the Word of God. That is Christ's own definition of the freedom of doctrine: 'If ye continue in My word, then ... ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' (John 8:31 f.). When the

B. The Gospel saves through absolution because it is the Truth of the Almighty Son of God.

*So, then, it is the Son, the Almighty Himself, who sets us free through His Word of Truth, Absolution, the Gospel*²¹. Jesus says:

He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me.²²

The Lutheran Church confesses that through Absolution, God Himself deals with us²³:

Moreover, the power of the keys administers and presents the Gospel through absolution, which [proclaims peace to me and] is the true voice of the Gospel. {German: The word of absolution speaks peace to me and is the Gospel itself.} Thus we also comprise absolution when we speak of faith, because *faith cometh by hearing*, as Paul says Rom. 10, 17. For when the Gospel is heard, and the absolution [*i.e.*, the promise of divine grace] is heard, the conscience is encouraged and receives consolation. And because God truly quickens through the Word, the keys truly remit sins before God [here on earth sins are truly canceled also before God in heaven] according to Luke 10, 16: *He that heareth you heareth Me*.²⁴

Obviously, because this is the Almighty's Word and the Almighty's Absolution, then, it is full of Almighty Power to Sanctify and to Save. For this reason the Apostle St. Paul writes that the Gospel is not the power of men, nor the power of the ideas of men, nor the power of the

theologian accepts and regards as Christian doctrine what the human Ego, his own or that of other men, has produced, he has become the slave of men. Under the watchword 'academic freedom' our age demands for the theologians freedom from the bondage of the Word, Holy Scripture, 'submission to the letter,' 'shameful academic coercion,' 'legalism,' etc. But this is the liberty of the flesh, the license demanded by the 'superman,' who sets himself above God's Word and will." The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. I, pp. 134, 135.

²¹... the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, and believes that, for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven, comforts the conscience, and delivers from terrors." The Augsburg Confession, Article XIII: Of Repentance.4, 5, 6, *Triglotta*, p. 49.

²²**St. Luke 10:16.**

²³"When God makes a promise, there He Himself is dealing with us and is giving and offering us something." Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 3, p. 24.

²⁴*The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII. (V.).39, Triglotta*, pp. 261.

rhetoric of men, nor the power of men's theories or opinions, but rather, the Gospel is "*the power of God*" unto salvation²⁵:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.²⁶

That Word that we hear is not mere hollow syllables nor empty gestures, but the full power of the Almighty. And this Word is the power of the Almighty not to condemn and crush, but to save to the uttermost because it absolves of sin. The Apostle St. Peter states regarding the Visible Word, Holy Baptism, and it's power to absolve, give the Holy Spirit, and save:

Then Peter said unto them, 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.²⁷

Clearly God's Visible Word, Holy Baptism, sanctifies because it absolves us of unsanctified things, namely, sin, and gives us the Holy Spirit. And because Holy Baptism absolves and gives us the Holy Spirit, it necessarily saves. The Apostle St. Peter writes:

The like figure whereunto *even* baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.²⁸

²⁵“The faith by which the Christian theologian, just as every Christian, apprehends and knows God's own doctrine in scripture, is not a knowledge or conviction gained by the use of his own natural powers (*fides humana* [human faith]), but is a knowledge and conviction wrought by the Holy Ghost through the divine Word itself (*fides divina* [Divine faith]); it is therefore, in contrast to worldly knowledge, the one certain knowledge, as Scripture itself declares (1 Cor. 2:12): ‘We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God, that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.’ Theology deals with certainties. In the words of Luther: ‘The Holy Ghost is not a skeptic, nor are what He has written on our hearts doubts or opinions, but assertions more certain and more firm than life itself and all human experience.’” The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. I, p. 108, translation in brackets and underscore added.

²⁶**Romans 1:16-17**, underscore added.

²⁷**Acts 2:38**.

²⁸**I Peter 3:21**.

And, again, Holy Baptism can do this because it is God's Visible and Almighty Word to sanctify and save; it is the Visible Gospel. The Lutheran Church confesses:

But just as the Word enters the ear in order to strike our hearts, so the rite itself strikes the eye, in order to move the heart. The effect of the Word and of the rite is the same, as it has been well said by Augustine that a Sacrament is a *visible word*, because the rite is received by the eyes, and is, as it were, a picture of the Word, signifying the same thing as the Word. Therefore the effect of both is the same.²⁹

Through the Gospel, men are absolved from that which causes their death. Through the Gospel, men enjoy the first resurrection from the dead of faith and new life. The Apostle St. Paul writes in Romans 6:

Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.³⁰

Through the Gospel, Our Creator is re-creating us, making us a new creation in Christ Jesus. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

Therefore if any man *be* in Christ, *he is* a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.³¹

The creation of faith through the Gospel is creating men anew and, therefore, just as great a Work of God as His creating men in the beginning. The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper writes:

Faith is not the product of human deliberation, self-decision, or concurrence, etc., but as much a creative work of God as the calling forth of light out of darkness at Creation (2 Cor. 4:6).³²

And again, all this happens through the sanctification of the Word. Jesus says:

²⁹*The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XIII (VII): Of the Number and Use of the Sacraments.*5, Triglotta, p. 309.

³⁰**Romans 6:3-4.**

³¹**II Corinthians 5:17.**

³²*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, p. 514.

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.³³

Luther writes:

By way of illustration, as God brought forth heaven and earth through the Word, that is, through Him, even so He, too, performed all that He wished by uttering a word. For instance: “Little girl, I say to you, arise” (Mark 5:41); and: “Young man, I say to you, arise” (Luke 7:14); and: “Lazarus, come out!” (John 11:43); and to the paralytic: “Rise, take up your bed and go home, be delivered of your sickness” (Matt. 9:6); and to the lepers: “Be clean!” (Matt. 8:3; Luke 17:14). In a similar way He fed 5,000 men with five loaves of bread and two fish, prompting those who witnessed this miracle to say: “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world” (John 6:14). When a great storm arose on the sea and the Lord rebuked the winds and the sea, all those in His ship marveled, saying: “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey Him?” (Matt. 8:27). With His words He also exorcised the evil spirits. All this He could accomplish with a single word.³⁴

And through this same Gospel comes the resurrection of the body from the dead on the last day and life eternal. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also *in the likeness of his resurrection* ...³⁵

And through this same Gospel, the Word of Truth through which God sanctifies, we gain life eternal. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.³⁶

³³**St. John 17:17.**

³⁴*Luther's Works*, Vol. 22, p. 144.

³⁵**Romans 6:5.**

³⁶**Titus 3:4-7.**

Conclusion

God's Word can save because it is God's Almighty Truth that Sanctifies by absolving of sin. Sin un-sanctifies us and causes us to lose life eternal. God's Word absolves us of that lethal component and gives to us the resurrection of faith now and the resurrection of the body on the last day.

And where there is the resurrection of the body, there God has re-created us unto life eternal through His Blessed Word and Truth, the Gospel.

Amen.