

Populous Zion

8 December, Anno Domini 2024

Romans 15:4-13

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ whose return we wait for daily.

The words of St. Paul before us today provide us with the opportunity to consider again the purpose of the Bible, Holy Scripture, and therefore the necessity for us to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Word of God. Without a proper understanding of the nature of Holy Scripture we won't fully understand our need for it. And unless we have a proper understanding of how it is properly used, then we won't be able to partake of its blessings.

The apostle, at the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, very simply says that what was written before (for him that was the Old Testament and for us that now also includes the New Testament) was written to teach us. From the Scriptures we learn heavenly truth. Further, that teaching has a specific goal - hope that is born of endurance and encouragement of the Scriptures. And what is that hope which is born of the Scriptures? It is the hope, not of a kingdom in this world or wealth or even ease, but of eternal life, the hope that on the last day, the day of Christ's return for judgment, we will not be cast into the fires of everlasting judgment as we deserve, but that we will instead be drawn into God's nearer and unveiled presence because the Blood of Jesus has atoned for us.

This is what the Holy Spirit teaches in the Scriptures - that we are hopelessly lost in our sin and are completely unable to save ourselves. But that God, rather than abandoning us, has shown us the greatest mercy imaginable - He laid the fulness of our punishment on His only and sinless Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, instead of on us. All of Scripture both the Old and New testaments teach these two fundamental truths. We refer to these doctrines as the Law and the Gospel. The Formula of Concord describes these teachings this way: "We believe, teach, and confess that the Law is properly a divine doctrine. It teaches what is right and pleasing to God

and it rebukes everything that is sin and contrary to God's will...But the Gospel is properly the kind teaching that shows what a person who has not kept the Law (you and me) is to believe (notice he doesn't say what we are to do). It teaches that Christ has paid for and made satisfaction for all sins. Christ has gained for an individual - without any of his own merit - forgiveness of sin, righteousness that avails before God, and eternal life." (FC, Ep. V, 2-5)

Thus, if you wish to know what is good and pleasing to God you must be instructed by the holy Law of God which is found only in the Scriptures. Even though this divine Law is written on the heart of every one of us (hence, for example, the universal understanding that murder is wrong) when we open the Scriptures and study God's Law, we are shown that our hearts are hopelessly perverse and wicked. We don't like the commandments in their fulness and are forever trying to bend them and get around them. We are drawn to what is wicked before God and hate what is good. The Law shows us that our desires and our wisdom which we want to believe are good and holy are actually evil and driven by selfishness and greed and pride. Only as the Holy Spirit holds the pure mirror of the Law in front of us can we even begin to see the depth of our corruption, our inability and unwillingness to keep the Ten Commandments, and thus how thoroughly we deserve every ounce of God's wrath.

We simply can't know this on our own. We too readily excuse our treachery, justifying evil and calling it good, while dismissing the good and even declaring it to be evil. Consider how often we recoil and resist when we are shown our sin. Or consider how many things we have done in secret that we wouldn't fathom doing if another person were watching. Thus if we refuse to read and study and meditate on the Scriptures, then we cannot hope to know God's will. We will try to imagine what we THINK will please God but we will never know for certain that it actually does and we will either be plagued with doubt, especially when death begins to close in around us, or we will foolishly perish under the delusion that we were good enough.

This is why it is not simply a good idea, but actually a necessity that each and

every one of us needs to know by hear the Ten Commandments. They are not child's play. Luther writes in his short preface to the Large Catechism "So a person who does not know the catechism could not be counted as a Christian or be admitted to any sacrament." (LC, Short Preface, 2)

Having then brought us to a true knowledge of our sin and true contrition, which is the terror of the conscience under the threat of God's righteous wrath and the loss of the hope of eternal life, the Holy Spirit then graciously teaches us something we couldn't begin to imagine - the Gospel. The Gospel is the one and only way a terrified conscience can find hope and rescue from the eternal judgment it know it deserves. In the strangest and most lopsided trade in history, the Son of God gave us His perfect righteousness and holiness in exchange for our sin and wicked rebellion and death. He joyfully took on human flesh and humbled Himself to the point of death on a cross so that we who hated Him and reviled Him and crucified Him might be freely forgiven every ounce of our guilt. He did not simply make a beginning of salvation that we had to bring to completion. He did it ALL. He accomplished all of it from start to finish and bestows it freely upon all who receive it in faith. No deals. No trades. Just salvation for poor, miserable sinners who couldn't ever hope to make either a beginning or an end of salvation.

And we would never know or believe such an incredible thing had been done for us unless God had graciously caused it to be proclaimed and preserved in Holy Scripture. What religion of man's imagination has ever proposed such a thing? None. Every religion of man, every religion that is not born of the pure Word of God, every perversion of the Gospel of Scripture places some amount of your salvation in your lap to bring about.

But this is demonic foolishness, completely contrary to the Scriptures. You have already learned from the Law that you are entirely incapable of doing literally ANYTHING good. Thus if any amount of your salvation depends upon your work, then you can be assured only of your eternal damnation. Even the idea that you must of your own power, apart from the Holy Spirit, choose to believe God's Word, accept Christ, or invite Him into your heart places your salvation in your

sinful hands rather than in the hands of God's Son which were pierced with nails to redeem you. Only the one who believes that his sins have been freely forgiven for the sake of Christ and who acknowledges that it is only by God's grace that he has heard this good news and believed it, can rest assured of his salvation because his trust is built on the works of Jesus, not his own.

What is more, through the Holy Scripture alone, the Word spoken by God Himself through His servants, God shows you that He has appointed very specific means by which He delivers this salvation to you. He has instituted the outward signs of Baptism and Holy Communion and promised that in these He bestows the forgiveness of sins so that all who believe God's own testimony in Scripture know with absolute certainty that they have the forgiveness of all their sins, life, and salvation. Who would believe that by a simple washing with water we are set free from death, made children of God, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit? No one unless God Himself declared it to be true. Thus He has told you in Scripture. Likewise, who would believe that under bread and wine we receive the crucified and risen Body and Blood of our Savior for the strengthening of faith and love? No one unless God Himself had said so. That is precisely what He has told you in Holy Scripture.

And it is through these precious means built upon the promises of God that our Savior gives and preserves hope. Hope that death is not our eternal fate. Hope that our sufferings in this life will be turned to eternal joy. Hope that our faith is not in vain and that the wicked who now everywhere seem to be the blessed ones, who mock us for believing the Word of God in the Bible, will one day be forever silenced and given the just rewards of their unbelief.

And because of the weakness of your flesh and the temptations that lay siege to you every day and the relentless assaults of the devil who would drive us back into unbelief and hopelessness, God has caused the Scriptures be written down so that you may read them and He commands you to not despise this Word but bids you to daily devote time and study to them. You need their encouragement. You need their truth. You need to have your sins brought to light so that you might repent of

them, receive Christ's forgiveness, and flee from them.

As such when we study the Scriptures we are to approach them in great humility, praying that the Holy Spirit would teach us. We let the Scriptures interpret us and submit ourselves to them, indeed to God Himself. We do not sit in judgment of Scripture but let it sit in judgment of us. To do otherwise would be to presume to sit in judgment of God Himself.

Christ our Lord is returning to judge the living and the dead. The basis of that judgment is not who is good and who is bad, but who has believed God's testimony concerning His Son and who, in pride, doubts or rejects that testimony. None will be excused. The testimony of God has gone out to the ends of the earth. It has gone out to you. Listen. Believe what the Lord God has told you. He desires your salvation. He has made known and clear how you may be preserved in the true faith through these gray and latter days and at last stand with joy before Christ when He comes. The word of God, Holy Scripture, is your light, your life, and your salvation. It will not ever change or pass away. Devote yourself to it. Read and study it in your homes. Hear it with your brothers and sisters in Christ as it is publicly read and proclaimed to you. Join your brother and sisters in Bible Class and Sunday School to dig into the Scriptures and be armed with them. Do not let the cares of this life weigh you down and take the Word of God from you. To do so is to give up salvation and eternal life itself.

God grant each of us His Holy Spirit so that we may love and treasure the Scriptures above all things and devote our time and energy to them so that in the midst of the turmoil we must endure, we may lift up our heads and look with joy to the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and

your minds in Christ Jesus.