

SETTING OUR FACES TO JERUSALEM

When the days drew near for Him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51)



The Crucifixion (1502), by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)

Jesus said to the disciples, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all the things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be finished." (Luke 18:31)

Jesus continually had to remind his disciples that things were not going to peaceful forever. Peter loved being on the glorious mountain of the Transfiguration. However, when Jesus told Peter that He was going to Jerusalem to suffer and die, Peter wanted nothing to do with it: "Lord, this shall never happen to you!" (Matthew 16:22). To this, Jesus promptly responded to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (16:23). The message is clear: **To not set one's face toward Jerusalem, to not set one's face toward the cross, is to embrace a demonic false**

gospel of beauty and glory. To such a gospel, Paul would quickly remind us, "If anyone preaches any other gospel... let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:9).

Christians must set their faces toward Jerusalem and ponder the cross (and not an empty cross but cross with a body). For this reason, the Church in her wisdom has set aside the season of Lent that we might consider the gravity and depth of our sin, look to the cross, and therein see *both* the wrath and love of God displayed in the wounds of Christ. There is a time for Christmas and there is a time for Easter. But there is also a time for Lent and there is a time for Good Friday. There is a time for everything, both tears of joy and tears of sorrow (Ecclesiastes 3:1–8), and not just any sorrow, but godly sorrow. St. Paul writes:

"I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner... for godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Corinthians 7:9–10).

Did you catch it? There is "godly sorrow" and there is "worldly sorrow." What is the difference? Godly sorrow is sorrow that is produced by God speaking to us by means of Christ's cross, it is a sorrow in which we confess that we have sinned and deserved nothing good from Him, but only the wrath and punishment which Jesus received. On the other hand, worldly sorrow is discontentment, anger, bitterness, self-righteousness, self-centeredness, and unbelief. We might consider the two thieves on the cross as pictures of the two kinds of sorrow. One has godly sorrow and repentance, the other does not:

One of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Jesus, saying, "If you are the Christ, save Yourself and us." But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And indeed justly, for we receive the due rewards of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." (Luke 23:40–41)

So, it does us no good to just be at the cross. It also matters what we think of Christ on the cross. But, of course, this raises other important questions.

Is the cross of Christ Law or Gospel? Both. Should it cause us to mourn our sin or be comforted by the love of God? Both. Both are necessary parts of repentance (see article below), and you cannot have one without the other. Without Christ receiving the wrath of God on the cross, there is no forgiveness of sins.

Without Christ being innocently condemned, there are no sinners who will be declared innocent and righteous despite their evil and wicked deeds. In other words, the cross should be both something that produces godly sorrow over sin and comfort and peace in the forgiveness of sins.

In addition, Christians must also set their faces toward Jerusalem because the Christian life is not just peace and glory. A cross-less Jesus is a Jesus who cannot comfort me when I must bear the cross, suffer in this life, and someday die. A Jesus who is not rejected, humiliated, mocked, spit upon, bruised, whipped, scourged, and nailed to a cross is a Jesus who does not heal my wounds: physical, mental, or otherwise. A Jesus who does not experience the total ugliness of human existence is a Jesus who does not speak to us in the midst of our fallen evil world.

But, if Jesus sets His face toward Jerusalem (and He did), then He is truly our brother in strife. As it is written, *“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin”* (Hebrews 4:15). He overcomes temptation for us, and His cross gives us strength to overcome our own temptations and bear our own cross with grace.

Therefore, we ought to set our faces to Jerusalem every day. We ponder the cross in its full mystery, both the wrath and love of God. For if we do not set our minds on the cross, then we are not setting our minds on the things of God, but on the things of men. May it never be so! Satan, get behind us! May Christ's cross be our comfort in all strife, and may it embolden us to bear our own in humility and patience. Let us set our faces to Jerusalem.

“To this you have been called because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth. When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to Him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.”
(1 Peter 2:21–24, explaining Isaiah 52:13–53:12)

REPENTANCE: OUR DAILY BAPTISM

At the beginning of Ash Wednesday, pastors around the LCMS will address their congregations and say, “From ancient

times the season of Lent has been kept as a special time of devotion, self-denial, and *humble repentance* born of a faithful heart that dwells confidently on His Word and draws from it life and hope.”¹ With these words, we are reminded that Lent is a penitential season, that is, it has to do with the life and practice of repentance. The Church is obliged to preach repentance because our Lord commanded the apostles:

*“Thus, it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise from the dead the third day, and that **repentance** and remission of sins ought to be preached in His name to all nations.”* (Luke 24:46–47)

So, what does “repentance” mean? When Holy Scripture tells us to “repent,” what exactly are we supposed to be doing? To answer these important questions, we can look both to Holy Scripture and to our Lutheran forefathers who had to struggle with the question of repentance.

When the Bible uses the word “repent,” it is either translating from the original Old Testament Hebrew or the New Testament Greek text. Therefore, a brief overview of these words will help us to understand what it means to repent. In Hebrew, the word for repent is *shūv* (שׁוּב), which means “to turn,” “return,” or “to go back.” In Greek, the word for repentance is *metanoia* (μετάνοια), which means “a change of mind,” “regret,” or “remorse.” Together, these words help us come to a working definition of repentance: *a change of mind or heart that results in remorse over sin and a turn back toward God and His Word.* Working with this definition, we should also ask: What does repentance look like? What are its parts?

Our Lutheran forefathers, speaking against the Roman Catholic understanding of repentance (penance) which burdened consciences, defined repentance in this way:

*Strictly speaking, **repentance consists of two parts.** One part is **contrition**, that is, terrors striking the conscience through knowledge of sin. The other part is **faith**, which is born of the Gospel or the Absolution and believes that for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven. It comforts the conscience and delivers it from terror. Then good works are bound to follow, which are the fruit of repentance.* (Augsburg Confession, Article XII.3–6)²

Here we see that repentance to not just be about feeling sorry (contrition), but also to be about turning back to God and to

¹ The Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 483.

² Paul Timothy McCain et al., eds., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*, trans. William Hermann Theodore Dau and Gerhard

Friedrich Bente, Second Edition. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 38.

Christ's cross in faith. After that, good works should organically grow as the fruit of repentance.

Notably, it is not our good works which merit forgiveness, but the free gift of the Gospel which preaches Jesus Christ. However, our Lutheran forefathers did not want us to think that doing good works was an optional part of the Christian life (something that we are all tempted to think!). Rather, good works should flow from a repentant heart that no longer desires to sin. Here, we might remember the words of St. John the Baptist, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance!" (Matthew 3:8). On a similar note, St. Paul asks a rhetorical question in Romans 6:1–4 as to what Christians should think of sinning willingly:

*"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? **Certainly not!** How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also ought to walk in newness of life."*

When we were instructed in the *Small Catechism*, we were taught what this verse means for us who have been baptized:

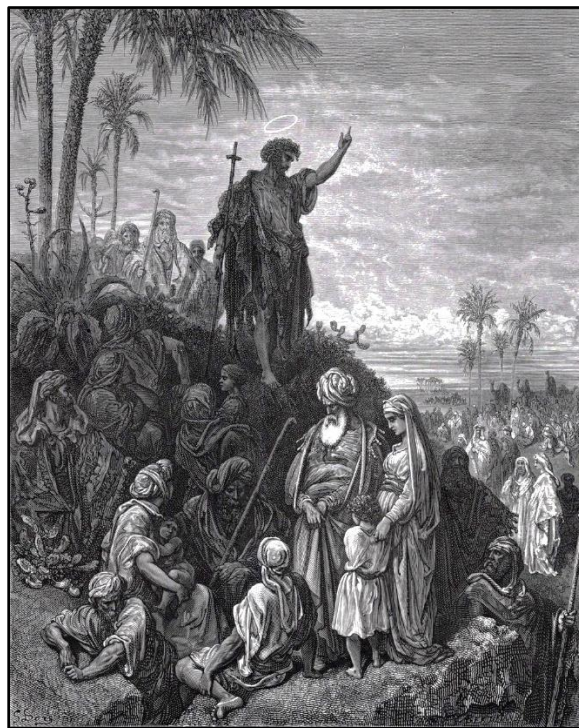
Baptism indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.³

There you have it: Baptism is lived out in daily contrition and repentance. In other words, as Baptized Christians, we are called to put to death our old man with his evil desires daily and live as new people, as God's children, seeking to do His will, just as our Savior Christ taught us. This is the daily and ongoing practice of Baptism. Luther explains this further in the *Large Catechism*:

Here you see that Baptism, both in its power and meaning, includes also the third Sacrament, which has been called repentance. It is really nothing other than Baptism. What else is repentance but a serious attack on the old man, that his lusts be restrained, and an entering into new life? Therefore, if you live in repentance, you walk in Baptism. For Baptism not only illustrates such a new life, but also produces, begins, and exercises it. For in Baptism are given grace, the Spirit, and power to suppress the old man, so that the new man may come forth and become strong (Romans 6:3–6).⁴

³ Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism: With Explanation* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 24.

Then comes the necessary question: *How do we practice this daily baptism? How do we practice repentance?* These are good questions, and they are the right questions. Christians who are repentant ask the question, "What should we do then?" For example, we should consider how people reacted to the preaching of repentance, as we see in St. John the Baptist and in St. Peter:



John the Baptist Preaching in the Wilderness,
by Gustave Doré (1832–1883)

John the Baptist said to the crowds that came to be baptized by him... "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance..." And the crowds asked him, "What shall we do?" ... and the tax collectors who came to be baptized said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" ... and Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" (Luke 3:7–14)

Now when the men of Israel heard Peter, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37)

So, when we ask this question of ourselves, we should also remember that our repentance is lived out in our daily vocations or roles which God has given us in this life. To this end, the *Table of Duties* in the *Small Catechism* is a helpful tool. The *Table of Duties* is a list of basic things that God requires of each of us in our vocations:⁵

⁴ McCain et al., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 430.

⁵ Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 33–36.

<i>Pastors:</i>	1 Timothy 3:2–4; 1 Timothy 3:6; Titus 1:9
<i>Laity:</i>	1 Corinthians 9:14; Galatians 6:6–7; 1 Timothy 5:17–18; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13
<i>Rulers:</i>	Romans 13:1–4
<i>Citizens:</i>	Matthew 22:21; Romans 13:5–7; 1 Timothy 2:1–3; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13–14
<i>Husbands:</i>	1 Peter 3:7; Colossians 3:19
<i>Wives:</i>	Ephesians 5:22; 1 Peter 3:5–6
<i>Parents:</i>	Ephesians 6:4
<i>Children:</i>	Ephesians 6:1–3
<i>Workers:</i>	Ephesians 6:5–8
<i>Employers:</i>	Ephesians 6:9
<i>Youth:</i>	1 Peter 5:5–6
<i>Widows:</i>	1 Timothy 5:5–6
<i>Everyone:</i>	Romans 13:9; 1 Timothy 2:1

Luther would have us read these passages from Scripture and consider what they say about our various places in life. Then we should question ourselves. As the *Small Catechism* says:

*Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?*⁶

If we have failed to do our duties and sinned, then we should confess them before God and realize we have not lived up to His commandments (**contrition**). Then, we should ask our Father for forgiveness, trusting in Jesus Christ, as the sacrifice for our sins (**faith**). Finally, having been forgiven, we should strive to live as God's children according to His commandment (**fruit, or good works**). This is how we practice repentance. This is how we live our Baptism. And we do it over and over again, until our Lord brings us from this valley of sorrow to be with Himself in heaven.

"If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." (Romans 8:13)

"Set your minds on things that are above, not on things on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God..."

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you... in these you once walked, when you were living in them, but now you must put them all away." (Colossians 3:1–17)

"By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:8–10)

TO ASH, OR NOT TO ASH?

Job said to the Lord, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore, I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5–6)

Passages such as this from the Old Testament show that repentance and ashes have always been linked together. When Jonah went and preached to the people of Ninevah, the king laid aside his royal robe and covered himself with sackcloth and ashes (Jonah 3:6). Because of passages like these, the practice of placing ashes upon the forehead as a sign of repentance has remained a practice in the Lutheran Church.

However, on Ash Wednesday, the very day in which many Christians will place ashes on their foreheads, the Church also hears these words of Jesus in the Gospel reading:

"When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But You, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in secret." (Matthew 6:16–18a)

What then are we to do? Should we put ashes on our foreheads as a sign of our repentance or should we wash our faces so that no one sees our fasting and repentance? To ash, or not to ash?

Holy Scripture contains no prescription concerning the imposition of ashes. Therefore, the decision to ash or not to ash is what we would call an *adiaphoron*, something neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. Therefore, it is left up to Christians whether or not to receive ashes.

However, if someone receives ashes, they should ask themselves, "Why am I doing this? What am I saying to God when I receive ashes upon my head?" After all, it does no one any good if they receive ashes, but they are not repentant in their

⁶ Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 25.

hearts. In fact, God specifically condemns this kind of false external repentance in Holy Scripture:

*“Now, therefore,” says the Lord, “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. **So, rend your hearts, and not your garments;** Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm.” (Joel 2:12–13)*

Yet, at the same time, this does not mean that repentance cannot be seen in external ways. For example, when King Josiah found the long-lost book of the Law and heard it read, he was so grieved that he tore his garments (2 Chronicles 34:19). Then the Lord God said to Josiah:

Thus says the Lord God of Israel: “Concerning the words which you have heard — because your heart was tender, and you humbled yourself before God when you heard His words against this place and its inhabitants, and you humbled yourself before Me, and you tore your clothes and wept before Me, I also have heard you.” (2 Chronicles 34:26–27)

So, God is not necessarily against external displays of repentance such as ashes or rending of garments, so long as they are motivated by true internal repentance of the heart (contrition and sorrow over sin).

However, we also must be careful of making the reception of ashes into a sacrament. Receiving ashes does not merit or earn forgiveness of sins. If you think that’s what you get when you receive ashes, then it would be better for you not to ash. It’s not about “going through the motions” nor is it merely about “showing up and getting it done.”

So, when we receive ashes this upcoming Wednesday, we should make sure that our repentance is not merely an external reality, but an internal one. And we *definitely* should not try to guilt other people, going around and saying to them, “Where are your ashes?!” If you’re tempted to do that, then it would be best for you to wash your own face when you go home as Jesus says, so that your repentance doesn’t become a show, but be only before “your Father who is in secret” (Matthew 6:18a).

ALMSGIVING, PRAYER, AND FASTING AND THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN VIRTUE

Jesus said to them, “When you give alms... when you pray... when you fast...” (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16)

Not “if,” but “when.” Jesus expected that as His disciples followed Him, they would give alms, pray, and fast. What He condemned was not the practices themselves, but rather when

they were done publicly, to be seen by other people. In fact, He introduces the entire section with this statement:

“Beware, lest you practice your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:1)

Continuing this theme, each practice gets its own warning:

“When you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others... do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” (Matthew 6:3)

“When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others... and do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.” (Matthew 6:5, 7)

“When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.” (Matthew 6:16)

Jesus never said, “Don’t give alms, don’t pray, don’t fast.” Rather, Jesus wants His disciples to give alms, pray, and fast for the right reasons and in the right manner. So, we should take some time to examine each of these practices.

Almsgiving – The Practice of Love and Mercy

Almsgiving has to do with love of the neighbor and extending the mercy which we have received from the Lord to others. This could mean giving to the homeless or putting more money in the offering plate. However, when we think about almsgiving less in terms of money and more about love and mercy, then we realize that there is more to talk about here.

We should ask ourselves these questions: What needs does my neighbor have that I could help fulfill? Who are those whom God has put in my life, whether it be at home, at work, in the congregation, or in my neighborhood? In what ways can I love them? Have I forgiven others as God has forgiven me?

In all these things, we remember the passage, “*We love because Christ first loved us*” (1 John 4:19). We don’t love others so that God will love us (or that others will love us). We don’t do good works so that we can work ourselves into God’s good grace. Rather, we do good works because God first showed love and mercy to us in Jesus Christ.

We also don’t do them as a show. In fact, if we were to show love or mercy to be seen by others, it’s no longer love or mercy, but selfishness and self-aggrandizement. We’ve all been guilty of

this, and we need to repent. Almsgiving is about extending the love and mercy we have received to others, not about being seen.

Jesus said to them, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another." (John 13:34).

Prayer – The Practice of Faith and Gratitude

Prayer is commanded in the Second Commandment, which is not just about misusing God's name or taking the name of the Lord in vain. It's also about using God's name in a right manner, so that we "call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks."⁷ This means that prayer is more than just "saying the words," it is also about practicing our faith.

So, we should ask ourselves the following questions: When things have gone bad in my life or I am frustrated or angry, have I looked to God for help and prayed to Him? Do I regularly seek God where He has promised to be for me, in His Word and in the Sacrament? Do I regularly praise God and give Him the glory due His name, gathering in Church? Do I give thanks to God when I have been successful or when something good has happened to me?

None of us have done these perfectly. However, there may also be an underlying problem: We don't believe God hears us or wants to hear us. But once again, the *Small Catechism* helps:

What is the Introduction to the Lord's Prayer?

Our Father who art in heaven.

What does this mean?

With these words, God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father.⁸

Jesus says that when we pray, we should call God "Father." This means, that we should not come to Him in fear, but rather as children expecting to receive good things:

Jesus said to the disciples, "What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish will give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:10–11)

Knowing that our Father desires to give us good things, and that He already has given us good things, especially His only Son

Jesus Christ, we should give thanks and practice gratitude. We shouldn't focus so much on what we *don't* have at this moment. But rather we should appreciate what God has given us already and be content with what he continues to give to us daily.

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thessalonians 5:16)

"What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits to me? I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord... I will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord now in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of You, O Jerusalem." (Psalm 116:12–13, 17–19)

Fasting – The Practice of Self-Control and Temperance

This is what most people think of when they think of "giving something up for Lent." However, the point is not just to "give something up," but rather to practice self-control and put the Old Adam to death and rise to new life (see the article on repentance). And when we begin to think of fasting as the practice of self-control, then we realize that fasting is much more than just giving up sweets or refraining from red meat.

Instead, we should ask ourselves these questions: Where have I failed to exercise self-control? In what ways am I letting my desires or cravings control my behavior and my body? Am I spending my time on things that matter, or do I spend a great deal of time doing things that are frivolous or even harmful to my body and soul? Do I let my emotions get the best of me?

The virtue that is closely associated with self-control is temperance. When we say that something is "temperate," we mean that it is neither hot nor cold, that it does not have great swings in temperature. Temperance has a similar idea. The virtue of temperance implies that we would not let our cravings, desires, passions, or lusts get the better of us, but reserve them for their proper time, manner, and place. Eating and drinking is good, but engorging oneself or getting drunk is a sin. Enjoying some entertainment once and while for the purpose of refreshment and rest is also good, but watching three hours of television every night or staring at your phone all day is a sin, especially if it keeps you from other duties.

God has given us many good gifts in this life and has given us desire for these good gifts, but when we begin to center our lives around these good gifts and not around God, we are not

⁷ Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 13.

⁸ Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 19–20.

practicing self-control or temperance and we have made an idol out of God's creation instead of worshipping our Creator.

"All things are lawful for me, but all things are not beneficial. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be ruled by anything."
(1 Corinthians 6:12)

*"Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is **temperate** in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore, I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus, I fight not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection."*
(1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

Some Practical Suggestions

Instead of simply "giving up something for Lent," here are some practical suggestions you might take up. Consider adopting one from each category:

Almsgiving (Love and Mercy) – Give aid to those who need it (money and/or time); Consider a larger offering; Volunteer at Church or to help those around you; Talk to the lonely or the depressed that God has placed in your life; Be reconciled and seek forgiveness.

Prayer (Faith and Gratitude) – Daily Devotions (Read the Psalter if you haven't already); Come more often to Divine Service (i.e., Midweek services); Come to Bible Study or bring someone to Bible Study.

Fasting (Self-Control and Temperance) – Give up screen time (this is called digital fasting and it's harder than you think); Spend less time with the things that bring you pleasure, and more time with other people; Seek help if you are struggling with a sin and it is ruling over you (consider private confession, see below).

Two More Things to Remember

There are two last things to remember in all of this: First, Lenten almsgiving, prayer, and fasting is not about meriting God's love or favor; that kind of thinking misses the point of Good Friday and Easter! Christ is our righteousness before God, not our works. Second, if you fail, you've been forgiven. In truth, the fact that God forgives you should make you be bolder to try and try again. This is not about being perfect. It's about living in repentance, dying to sin, and rising to new life daily; it's about living out the life given in Holy Baptism (see above). More importantly, you are not alone in this. God has given us His Holy Spirit to strengthen us in this fight against sin. And finally, the

Christian life is a constant struggle against sin, but in these things, we should remember that it will not always be a constant struggle. One day, we will have the victory, thanks to Jesus Christ, our Lord. As St. Paul writes:

"I delight in the law of God according to my inward man, but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:22-25)

PRIVATE CONFESSION AND ITS BENEFITS

Jesus said, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:19)



"When I urge you to go to Confession, I am doing nothing else than urging you to be a Christian." – Martin Luther, *A Brief Admonition to Confession* (1529)

One of the distinctive marks of the Lutheran Church that separates her from other protestant bodies is the retention of Confession and Absolution, both public and private. The Lutheran Reformation retained this because of Jesus' words in John 20:21-23:

Jesus said to them, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

The *Small Catechism* explains these words:

What do you believe according to these words?

I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this

*is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.*⁹

In other words, the pastor's absolution is not really *his* absolution, it is *Christ's* absolution, as is said in Divine Service, "in the stead [that is, in the place of] and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins." The hymn "As Surely as I Live," *God Said* (LSB 614), explains this clearly:

*5 The words which absolution give
are His [Christ's] who died that we might live;
the minister whom Christ has sent
is but His humble instrument.*

In other words: Your pastor is there to forgive you and to be Christ's voice to you, that you may know your sins are forgiven and your conscience may be clean.

If this seems strange to you, it's okay. For many Lutherans, the idea of private confession and absolution seems like a relic of the past. However, every Lutheran who has ever been instructed in the *Small Catechism* has at the very least been exposed to the idea of Private Confession and Absolution, even though they may have never experienced it. In the *Small Catechism*, the following questions are asked of catechumens:

What is Confession?

Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.

What sins should we confess?

*Before God, we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer; but before the pastor we should confess those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.*¹⁰

Here, Luther teaches us how we should confess our sins privately before a pastor, not trying to name all our sins which we have ever done, but only those which burden our consciences. The point is this: Is something bothering your conscience? You can go to your pastor, get it off your chest and be free of it. Does guilt burden your heart as you lay your head on your pillow at night? You can go to your pastor, and he can remind you that Christ indeed died for whatever sin is bothering you, and he can pronounce absolution over that specific sin, to make it clear: You are forgiven for what you've done.

If all of this were not enough, the *Augsburg Confession* (the confession of the Lutheran Church which pastors and congregations swear to uphold) explains:

*Our churches teach that private absolution should be retained in the churches, although listing all sins is not necessary for Confession. For, according to the Psalm, it is impossible. "Who can discern his errors?" (Psalm 19:12).*¹¹

The point of private confession and absolution is not to completely list all our sins. We couldn't do it if we tried. The point is to confess those sins that bother us *aloud verbally* and *name them*. This is one of the benefits of private confession and absolution. We name our sins aloud, owning them, and then our pastor pronounces absolution on those sins, making it clear, they are forgiven. In addition, it also gives the pastor an opportunity to provide us counsel that is specifically tailored to our situation and life. In many situations, the question is not just, "Have I been forgiven of *this* sin?" But the question is, "How do I *deal* with this sin?" While public confession and absolution is truly absolution, private confession and absolution gives the pastor the opportunity to speak and provide pastoral care and counsel for each person as an individual.

So, if you're reading this, and you've never had private confession and absolution and are considering it, I would encourage you to come and talk to me. Even if you don't want to go to confession but want to talk about the idea of confession and whatever fears you may have, I'd be happy to discuss it with you. Remember this: Satan wants you to be afraid of confessing your sins. He does not want us to seek help when our consciences are burdened. But that is not what God wants. St. John writes in his first epistle:

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."
(1 John 1:8-9)

Don't let Satan come between you and God, and don't let him keep you from your pastor. God sent him to you to care for you. As we sing in the hymn "*Baptismal Waters Cover Me*" (LSB 616):

*4 From Your own mouth comes forth a word;
Your shepherd speaks, but You are heard;
Through him Your hand now stretches out,
Forgiving sin, destroying doubt.*

⁹ Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 27.

¹⁰ Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 25.

¹¹ McCain et al., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 35-37.

HYMN OF THE SEASON: “JESUS, GRANT THAT BALM AND HEALING” (LSB # 421)

This Lenten season, we will sing the hymn “Jesus, Grant that Balm and Healing” every Sunday as a congregation. Therefore, we should take some time here to meditate upon the words of the hymn so that we can sing the hymn more intentionally. First, a brief biography of the author is in order.



Johann Heermann (1585–1647) was a Lutheran pastor who was born in Lower Silesia (modern day Poland). From the moment that Johann was born, his life was filled with trials. He was born with a severe childhood illness. Later, in 1611 he became a deacon in Köben (now Chobenia, Poland) and he married his first wife, Dorothea. Five years later, the city of Köben was almost completely burned to the ground. The next year, Dorothea died childless. Two years later, God blessed Heermann with another wife named Anna, who bore him four children. However, this also coincided with the terrible Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), which was especially difficult on Köben. It was plundered four times by Roman Catholic armies. Every time, Heermann had to flee for his life. Sometimes, this

meant that he lost every possession he owned. Other times, he barely dodged being killed by the sword and by bullets. Then, in 1631, a pestilence came which killed 550 people in Köben alone. Around this time, Heermann contracted a severe throat infection and could no longer preach; instead, an assistant would have to read his sermons. He then retired and his wife cared for him through his last few years which were plagued with severe and chronic illness. For all his trials, another pastor named Heermann “The Silesian Job.” Next to Martin Luther and Paul Gerhardt, he is often considered the finest hymn writer of the Lutheran Church.¹²

The text of the hymn is based chiefly on Isaiah 53:5, “He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.” “Because Christ Jesus bore our sins and griefs and sorrows in His body on the cross and was there wounded for our transgressions, we are healed by His suffering and by the scourging He endured on our behalf. It is in that confidence that we pray, as in the Sixth and Seventh Petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, that our Lord would not lead us into temptation but deliver us from evil (Matthew 6:13). That prayer is fundamental to the daily repentance of the baptized at all times, but of course it is especially well suited to the penitential discipline of Lent.”¹³ Now, let us consider the text:

1 *Jesus, grant that balm and healing
in Your holy wounds I find,
ev’ry hour that I am feeling
pains of body and of mind.
Should some evil thought within
tempt my treach’rous heart to sin,
show the peril, and from sinning
keep me from its first beginning.*

This first stanza introduces the hymn’s main theme: *The wounds of Christ bring healing to all ills, whether they be of the body or the mind.* Christ suffers bodily on the cross that we might not fear pain or death but look to the resurrection. Christ also suffers the mental agony on the cross as He is abandoned by those whom He loves and experiences the wrath of the Father.

This first stanza also discusses the first source of temptation: our fallen sinful flesh. This inborn inclination to sin we call *concupiscence*. Our fallen flesh causes us to think evil thoughts about God and one another. In the midst of these temptations, this prayer reminds us that we are capable of resisting temptation

¹² Richard Stuckwisch, “Heermann, Johann (1585–1647),” in *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns*, ed. Joseph Herl, Peter C. Reske, and Jon D. Vieker, vol. 2, 2 vols. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2019), 390–91.

¹³ Richard Stuckwisch, “Jesus, Grant That Balm and Healing (#421),” in *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns*, ed. Joseph Herl, Peter C. Reske, and Jon D. Vieker, vol. 1 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2019), 421.

by stopping in our tracks and considering the peril or danger of willingly walking into sin. St. Paul speaks in a similar way:

“No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”
(1 Corinthians 10:13)

Yet, in the hymn we also pray “keep me from sinning,” reminding us that we cannot resist evil on our own but need God’s help.

2 *Should some lust or sharp temptation
fascinate my sinful mind,
draw me to Your cross and passion,
and new courage I shall find.
Or should Satan press me hard,
let me then be on my guard,
saying, “Christ for me was wounded,”
that the tempter flee confounded.*

The second stanza shows us where we are to find God’s help and the strength needed to resist temptation: the cross of Christ. “Draw me to Your cross and passion, and new courage I shall find.” When we look at the cross, we see both God’s wrath against our sin and God’s love for us in Christ Jesus. Both of these reminders are needed in the fight. We need to see God’s wrath lest we think sinning is no big deal. We need to see God’s love in Christ that we do not give into despair.

The second stanza also directs us toward the second source of temptation: the Devil. But we also are reminded that Satan tempted our Lord in the wilderness on our behalf, and Jesus came out victorious (Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:9–15; Luke 4:1–13). Likewise, we can resist the Devil, and he will flee from us (see James 4:7), because Christ confronted him and conquered him on our behalf.¹⁴

3 *If the world my heart entices
with the broad and easy road,
with seductive sinful vices,
let me weigh the awful load
You were willing to endure.
Help me flee all thoughts impure
and to master each temptation,
calm in prayer and meditation.*

The third stanza now directs us to the third source of temptation: the world. When we say that the world tempts us,

we are really talking about peer pressure and cultural pressure. Other people in our life and in our society will tempt us to sin and take “the broad and easy road that leads to destruction” (Matthew 7:13) rather than taking the “narrow and strict road which leads to life” (Matthew 7:14).

The hymn encourages us to consider Christ who willingly suffered for us (Hebrews 12:3). Instead of giving into the enticement of sinners who try to seduce us with vices (Proverbs 1:10), we cling to Christ by faith in His Word and we pray to God for help that we might be virtuous and courageous in the face of evil. If we did not need to pray for these things, if we were able to do these things on our own without his aid, he would not have commanded us to pray, “Deliver us from evil.”

4 *Ev’ry wound that pains or grieves me
by Your wounds, Lord, is made whole;
when I’m faint, Your cross revives me,
granting new life to my soul.
Yes, Your comfort renders sweet
ev’ry bitter cup I meet;
for Your all atoning passion
has procured my soul’s salvation.*

Having dealt with the three sources of temptation (our flesh, the devil, the world), the hymn now deals with our hardships. Life is full of pain and grief. We cannot avoid sorrow, but we can choose how to deal with it. We can run to all kinds of temporary solutions that numb the pain, but in the end, they do not provide lasting healing. It is “by His wounds” that we are “made whole” and “healed” (Isaiah 53:5). He atoned for our sins and has made us right with God. The Lord Christ drank the bitter cup of God’s wrath that the bitterness of this life may be made sweet for us (Matthew 26:39). The cup which he gives us by his passion is a cup of blessing and salvation (Matthew 26:27–29; 1 Corinthians 10:16–21). His body and blood bring us forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. By this, he comforts us and “renders sweet” the trials and temptations we face as we live in the world.

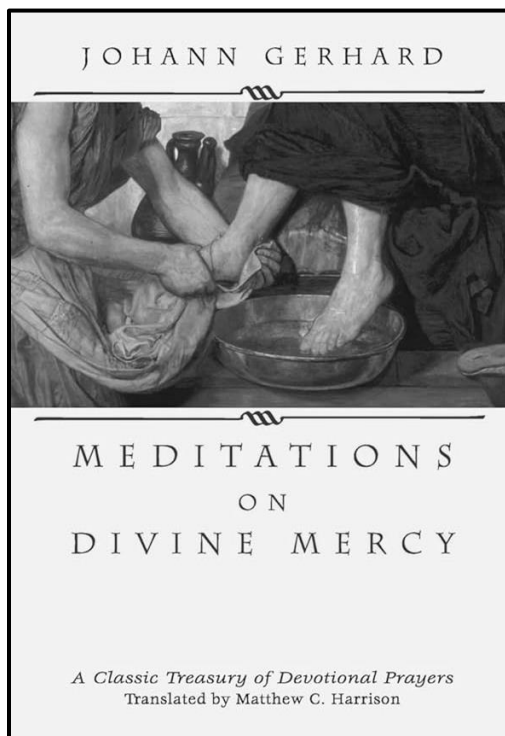
5 *O my God, my rock and tower,
grant that in Your death I trust,
knowing death has lost its power
since You crushed it in the dust.
Savior, let Your agony
ever help and comfort me;
when I die be my protection,
light and life and resurrection.*

¹⁴James 4:7 reads, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” Stuckwisch, “Jesus, Grant That Balm and Healing (#421),” 240.

Since the hymn has addressed temptations and hardships, there is but one enemy left to conquer: death. Not only is the cross of Christ that which defeats temptation and comforts us in our hardships, but it is also our comfort in death. Luther once wrote, “The custom of holding a crucifix before a dying person has kept many in the Christian faith and has enabled them to die with a confident faith in the crucified Christ.”¹⁵ When we consider His cross and suffering and know that death did not get the final say, we thereby are comforted that death will not get the final say over us, for we are baptized into His death and resurrection (Romans 6:1–5). Thus, we see the full story of Lent to Holy Week: temptation, suffering, cross, resurrection. By these things God has come to our aid and still comes to our aid, for “by His wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

TWO PRAYERS AS WE SET OUR FACES TO JERUSALEM AND TO THE CROSS OF CHRIST

The following are two prayers written by Johann Gerhard (1582–1637) in his *Meditations on Divine Mercy* (trans. President Matthew C. Harrison) that are well-suited for the season of Lent.¹⁶ If you are looking to take up a new practice of prayer this Lententide, this book is a good place to start. As of writing this, it can be purchased for \$15 in hardback edition.



A Prayer Concerning God's Wrath Against Sin

“O Holy God, just Judge, I see Your Son hanging on the cross, streams of blood flowing freely. I look to Him and, behold, I become weak with terror. Those cruel nails are my sins with which I have pierced His hands and feet. Those horrible thorns are my sins with which I have crowned His holy head, the head worshiped and honored by angelic powers. Those sharply pointed lashes are my sins with which I have scourged His faultless body, the permanent temple of divinity. A terrible beast tore to pieces this heavenly Joseph and stained His robe with blood (Genesis 37:33). I, a wretched sinner, am that terrible beast because my sins rushed altogether against this Your beloved Son (Isaiah 53:6).

If this, Your obedient Son, suffers in anguish because of the sins of another, what will be meted out to disobedient and wayward children because of their sins? Truly, the wounds of my soul must be great and deadly if they can only be healed because Your only begotten Son is so wretchedly struck down. Truly, the disease of my soul must be great and deadly if it can only be cured because the heavenly Physician, Life itself, dies on a cross.

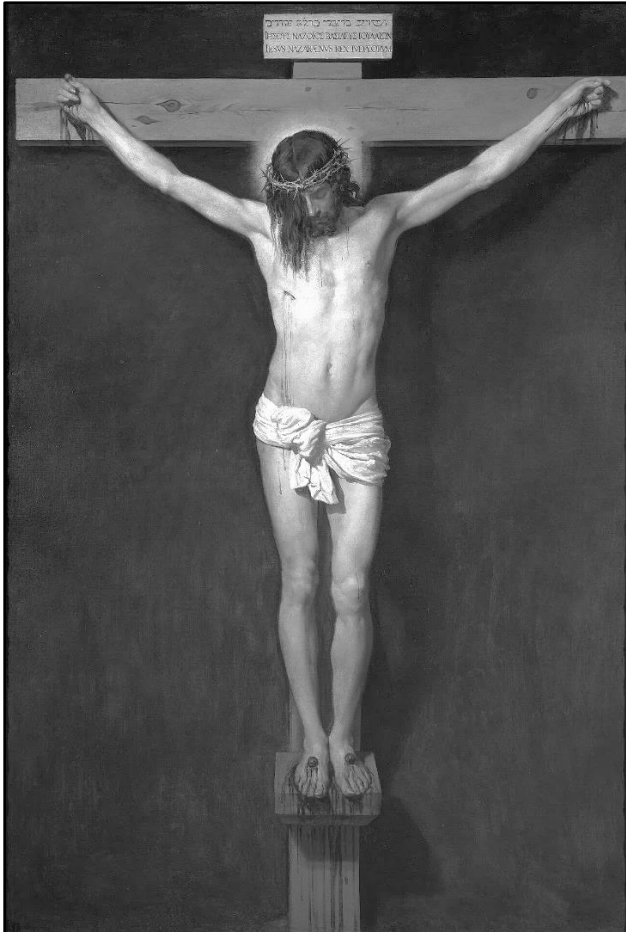
I see the torment of my Savior. I hear His wretched wailing on the cross (Matthew 27:46). He is tormented because of me. He complains loudly that His Father has forsaken Him because of my sins. If the weight of another's sins strikes down the all-powerful Son of God, how unbearable will the wrath of God and His inestimable furor be against the unprofitable servant (Luke 17:10)? O dry and unfruitful wood, sold to the fires of eternal hell, what will be your lot if this is what happens to the green wood (Luke 23:31)? Christ is the green tree of life. Christ is a vigorous tree, rooted in divinity, part and parcel of humanity, famed for His virtues, possessing leaves of holy words, and yielding the fruit of good works. He is the cedar of modesty and the vine of peace, the palm of patience and the olive of mercy.

But if the fire of divine wrath burned against this green wood, the tree of life, because of the sins of others, how much more will it completely consume the sinner as a dry tree because of unfruitful works? How great and bloody the letters of my sin appear when written on the body of Christ. How striking, O most righteous God, is Your wrath against my iniquity. How tightly I must have been held in captivity because so precious a ransom was given to release me. How great the stains of my sin must have been because streams of blood from the body of Christ flowed to wash them away (Luke 22:44).

¹⁵ Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. John,” AE 22:147.

¹⁶ Johann Gerhard, *Meditations on Divine Mercy: A Classic Treasury of Devotional Prayers*, trans. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2003).

O most righteous God, yet most kind Father, behold how unjustly Your Son suffered for me. Forget how unworthily I, Your wretched servant, have acted. Look to Christ's deep wounds and plunge my sins into the deepest depths of the sea of Your mercy (Micah 7:19). AMEN."¹⁷



Christ Crucified (1632), by Diego Velázquez (1599–1660)

A Prayer of Thanksgiving for Christ's Suffering

"O Most Godly Jesus, I thank You that, receiving the penalty of my sin, You willingly underwent hunger, thirst, cold, exhaustion, ridicule, mockery, persecution, sorrow, poverty, imprisonment, scourging, the piercing of thorns, and even a bitter death on the cross. How great is the first of Your love that persuaded You to plunge willingly into the sea of that suffering for a miserable and ungrateful slave such as me. In Your innocence and righteousness, You were free from all suffering, but Your immeasurable and indescribable love made You a debtor and a defendant in my place. I committed the crime; You underwent the punishment. I plundered; You made amends (Psalm 69:4). I sinned; You were punished.

O kindest Jesus, I recognize the depth of Your mercy and the earnestness of Your love (Luke 1:78). You appear to love me more than You love Yourself because You gave Yourself up for me. Why was the sentence of death pronounced on You? You are completely innocent. Why were You, the fairest among the sons of men, spit on (Psalm 45:2)? Why did You, the righteous One, undergo flogging and fetters? All these abuses rightly belonged to me. But You, because of unspeakable love, descended to the prison of this world. You clothed Yourself with my servile dwelling, willingly taking on Yourself what I justly deserve. Because of my sin, I was to be assigned to the unceasing, scorching flames of hell. But You boiled with the fire of love on the alter of the cross, setting me free from those flames. I was to be cast away from the face of the heavenly Father because of my sin. But for my sake, You chose to be abandoned by Your heavenly Father. I was to be tormented forever by the devil and his angels. But You, because of immeasurable love, gave Yourself for me and were harassed and crucified by the servants of Satan.

In the various ways You were made to suffer, I see evidence of Your love for me. Those fetters, those scourgings, those thorns that injured You were because of my sins. You bore all this because of me, because of Your indescribable love. Your love was not satisfied by the assumption of my flesh. You desired to establish that love even more firmly through that most bitter passion of Your soul and body. Who am I, most powerful Lord, that for the sake of a disobedient slave You willingly served so many years? Who am I, the most disgraceful bondservant of sin and adulterous slave of the devil, that for my sake You, fairest bridegroom, did not refuse to die? Who am I, kindest Creator, that for my sake, a most wretched creature, You did not shrink from the punishment of the cross?

Truly, most loving Bridegroom, to You I am a blood bride. For my sake, You poured forth blood so abundantly. Truly, fairest Lily, to You I am an injurious and piercing thorn. I placed on You a harsh and enduring load. The weight of this so pressed You that drops of blood freely flowed from Your body. So, because of Your love, Lord Jesus, my only redeemer and mediator, I will sing psalms of praise to You for eternity. AMEN."¹⁸

Pastor Alexander Blanken

Office: (402)-286-4929

Cell: (402)-518-1602

Email: revblanken@gmail.com

"This is one should regard us: as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." (1 Corinthians 4:1)

¹⁷ Gerhard, *Meditations on Divine Mercy*, 50–52.

¹⁸ Gerhard, *Meditations on Divine Mercy*, 67–69.