

THE OPENING SERMON

for the

Fifty-first Annual Convention

of the

CONCORDIA LUTHERAN CONFERENCE

Delivered by the Rev. M. L. Natterer, Conference President

Text: **Matthew 9:1-8**

In Christ Jesus, our only Savior, my dear fellow -believers!

It is customary that we confess the Apostles' Creed every Sunday after the Gospel Lesson has been read. This is a very praiseworthy custom, for in these words we express the conviction of our hearts in the very fundamental doctrines of Holy Writ. We know that the Apostles' Creed is very old. A tradition has been handed down that it was written by the twelve apostles. But whether this is true cannot be definitely established. However we do know from the writings of the early church fathers that candidates for Baptism were required to make a confession of their faith. And this confession of faith, which was in use during the time of the apostles, agrees with the contents and many of the statements in the Apostles' Creed, which, according to one historian, dates back to the year 150 after Christ. In view of the uncertainty of its exact origin, however, true Lutherans do not regard the Apostles' Creed as inspired, much less as superior even to the Holy Scriptures, but receive it because its doctrine is taken from the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments. The same procedure must always be followed with every creed. "Is it in harmony with the Scriptures?" That is the question we must always ask. In a very concise and faithful manner the Apostles' Creed states the truths of God's Holy Word. For in the Apostles' Creed we not only confess our faith in the Triune God, the Father who created all things, the Son who has redeemed us from sin, death, and hell, and the Holy Ghost who through the Gospel has worked the true saving faith in our hearts; but we also confess: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." We believe in the forgiveness of sins because it is the teaching of God's Word, the teaching which fills our hearts with comfort and peace. Let us then at this opening service of our convention direct our attention to the words of Jesus:

"Be of Good Cheer; Thy Sins Be Forgiven Thee!"

I. These are words of the greatest comfort.

II. These are words which we can trust.

I.

The Evangelist Matthew writes, "*And He [Jesus] entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into His own city.*" The Lord Jesus had been in the country of the Gergesenes where He had performed a miracle. He had cured two men who were possessed with a devil. These men had their homes in the tombs which were hollowed out places on the hillsides. They were so fierce that no man might pass by that way. Yet they were no match for the almighty Son of God, who drove the devils into a herd of swine which ran down a steep hill into the sea and perished in the waters. The result of this miracle was the opposite of what we would expect. Instead of receiving Jesus as their Lord and Savior, they besought Him that He would depart out of their coasts. And Jesus did not stay where He was not wanted, but, "*entering into a ship, ... [He] came into His own city,*" the city of Capernaum. This was the city which served as the headquarters

from which He carried on His ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing.

No sooner had Jesus come into the city of Capernaum, “*and behold, they brought to Him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed; and Jesus, seeing their faith, said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee.*” From the Gospels of Mark and Luke where this story is also recorded, we find that Jesus was in a house instructing and teaching the people concerning the Kingdom of God. The crowd was so great that there was no room even at the door. When these men brought the man sick of the palsy to Jesus, they could not get to Him because of the crowd. They then uncovered a section of the flat roof where Jesus was speaking and let down the bed on which the palsied man lay. Thus they spared no labor in bringing this man to Jesus. After all, palsy was a dreaded disease. It either took possession of the entire body by robbing the individual of the feeling of his nerves and muscles, thus making it impossible for him to move, or else it attacked merely a portion of the body, paralyzing it.

The question: “Which is of greater importance, the forgiveness of sins or the removal of bodily ailments?” is thus answered for all time! The Lord Jesus knew that to be a sinner, to be weighed down with sin, was the saddest and most tragic thing of all. And the palsied man in the text was troubled by the memory of sin more than by his bodily affliction, otherwise the quieting assurance from the Savior would never have been necessary: “*Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee.*”

Our conscience often accuses and upbraids us. We know the Ten Commandments, having memorized them already when we were little children and having had them explained to us in Sunday School and instruction classes where we obtained a fuller understanding of them. Thus we know what is right and wrong from the Law of God. Yet, even though we are believers who seek to walk the way of God’s Commandments, nonetheless we must confess with the apostle: “*The good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do*” (Romans 7:19).

Our conscience often accuses and upbraids us. We cry out with the hymnwriter, “Alas, my God, my sins are great, my conscience doth upbraid me; and now I find that in my strait no man hath pow’r to aid me. And fled I hence in my despair, in some lone spot to hide me, my griefs would still be with me there; and peace still be denied me” (TLH 317). Our conscience, smitten by God’s holy Law, burns within us and tells us, “You are a sinner.” Look at the example of David. His conscience plagued him because of the sins of adultery and murder of which he had been guilty. Here he had taken another man’s wife away from him and then planned the destruction of her husband to cover up his sin (II Samuel 11). We hear him bemoaning his sins in his penitential Psalms and crying out: “*My soul is sore vexed; but Thou, O Lord, how long? Return, O Lord, deliver my soul; oh save me for Thy mercies’ sake*” (6:3,4); “*wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me*” (51:2-3).

As sin is the greatest evil on earth, so forgiveness of sins is the greatest good that God can give to us! To realize the great importance of the forgiveness of sin, we must recognize the terribleness of sin. Sin is no trifling matter, even though we observe people often making a big joke of it. But the Lord warns us that “*fools make a mock at sin*” (Proverbs 14:9). All of the illness, sickness, heartache, sorrows, woes and death, are the consequences of sin which is at the bottom of all ills of life. Sin is the worst calamity ever to befall mankind. “*Sin is the transgression of the Law*” (I John 3:4), and “*the wages of sin is death*” (Romans 6:23). But what glorious comfort the Lord gives us. He forgives sins. He does not excuse it, as some parents and grandparents excuse the sins of their children and grandchildren.

Just think! God does not mark iniquities; He does not impute trespasses; but He pronounces us righteous and just — all this by grace and not by our works. The man in our text this morning had no merit or worthiness of which to boast. But the Lord Jesus forgives his sin. And when Jesus tells the man: *“Thy sins be forgiven thee,”* there is no limitation or restriction. He does not tell the man, as does the Roman Catholic priest, “This forgiveness is contingent upon your carrying out the satisfaction which I shall impose upon you.” The Lord Jesus forgives *original* sin, as well as all *actual* sin, no matter how great or small: *“Thy sins be forgiven thee.”* And Jesus has every right to grant such absolution, for He says: *“The Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins.”* Note the expression, *“Son of Man.”* St. Paul writes: *“God was manifest in the flesh”* (I Timothy 3:16). God assumed a true human form for the very purpose of working out His plan of salvation for all men, *“for the Son of Man is come to save that which was lost”* (Matthew 18:11). And this forgiveness is accepted by the receiving hand of faith. Our hearts need no longer be filled with thoughts of gloom and despair, but rather with *“good cheer.”* Now we are the beloved of our dear heavenly Father through faith in Christ His Son. As sin closed the gate of heaven, the forgiveness of sins is the key which has opened it again.

And yet, when Christ absolved the man in our text, here was a reaction to it that hardly bespeaks the joy that should result from heaven being opened to a penitent sinner: *“When the multitudes saw it, they marveled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men.”* Instead of deriving great comfort from this glorious message, there are many still today who are like the scribes of old and revile it. When they hear absolution pronounced by the Pastor after the confession of sins, “Upon this your confession, I by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you; and, in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost” (page 16 in *The Lutheran Hymnal*), they say: *“This man blasphemeth... Who can forgive sins but God only?”* (Mark 2:7). True, to forgive sins is a prerogative of God; but He can surely commission and authorize others to forgive sins in His Name. The Apostle Paul tells us, *“Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God”* (II Corinthians 5:20). And in the Gospel of John, chapter 20, the Savior tells His ambassadors: *“Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained”* (v. 23). Therefore, the absolution pronounced over us, Luther says, “is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself” (*Small Catechism*, Office of the Keys and Confession). Of all the benefits won for us by Christ and imparted to us by the Gospel, forgiveness is the most necessary, the greatest, and the grandest. Without forgiveness, there is nothing but an accusing conscience, an angry Judge, utter despair, and eternal damnation. O, how we should rejoice to hear these words from the lips of the Savior, who loved us unto death: *“Be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee.”*

II.

These words of the Lord Jesus, *“Thy sins be forgiven thee,”* are also trustworthy words! They are the words of the almighty Son of God Himself. We read: *“And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth. And Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise and walk?”* Christ, *“in whom dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily”* (Colossians 2:9) forgives sin; for He is *“God manifest in the flesh”* (I Timothy 3:16). That Christ is God is clearly evident from our text. For only God is omniscient and knows all things, even the secret intents and thoughts of the human heart. Thus the Lord Jesus knew just exactly what the scribes were thinking, even though they had not put into words the thoughts of their

hearts.

Moreover, the Lord Jesus proves His authority by performing a miracle right before the eyes of all the people. “*But that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith He to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house.*” Here again, we know on the basis of Holy Writ that only God can perform a true miracle. Because Jesus is true God, He performs this marvelous miracle to give testimony to the truth that He possesses the authority and power to forgive sins. And all this is recorded in the Book of which the Apostle Paul, as the penman of the Holy Spirit, declares: “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God*” (II Timothy 3:16). Do we ever doubt the words of Christ that all our sins have been forgiven and allow ourselves to be filled with thoughts of doubt and uncertainty? It is the devil, the father of all lies, who instills such thoughts within our hearts. Let us therefore dispel them by focusing our eyes upon these words of Him who cannot lie, the almighty Son of God, “*Be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee.*” Amen.

Soli Deo gloria!

THE SUNDAY SERMON

for the

Fifty-first Annual Convention

of the

CONCORDIA LUTHERAN CONFERENCE

Delivered by the Rev. David T. Mensing, Pastor
Peace Ev. Lutheran Church, Oak Forest, Illinois

Text: **Romans 6:23**

In the Name of Jesus Christ, our blessed Redeemer from sin, death, and Satan, dearly beloved hearers of His precious Word:

The basic rule of **salesmanship**, essential not only for *attracting attention* to one’s product or service, but for “*closing*” a prospective client, that is, convincing him actually to **purchase** what is being offered, is often phrased in this manner: The salesman must “create **the need**” for his product or service in the mind of a potential buyer. He doesn’t really have to convince the person to **buy**; he doesn’t even have to convince him to buy **now**. The perception of a pressing **need** for the item will almost invariably result in the *desire* to have it, the *motivation* to acquire it, the *incentive* to get it, and the *determination* to buy it...TODAY. Even the price has little to do with the eventual sale — if the person **NEEDS** the item **badly** enough.

The trend in most churches today —across denominational lines— is to fulfill the *humanistic* goal of making people **feel good** about themselves. Therefore their pastors adopt a “non-threatening” approach in their preaching and teaching. They “sanitize” their language, straining out any words or expressions that may be regarded as “harsh,” “demanding,” or “judgmental,” expressions that create feelings of guilt or shame, that destroy a person’s positive “self image.”

Hence, the words “sin,” “depravity,” “wretchedness,” “helplessness,” and “guilt,” as well as words that describe the dire consequences of sin —eternal death, damnation, torment, and contempt in hell— are deemed either “politically incorrect” or they are stricken from one’s theological vocabulary as counter-productive and even “dangerous.”

And then so many wonder why churches cannot *give away* the Gospel of Jesus Christ! The reason is really very SIMPLE: Antinomistic spiritual “snake oil salesmen” deprive their hearers of God’s holy Law, which, as a mirror, shows men their sins, their depravity, their wretchedness, their helplessness, and their lost condition; and therefore they feel no NEED for salvation. They NEED no ransom, no redemption, no rescue from jeopardy that does not exist.

But, as we learn from the text before us this morning, this straight “up and down” Law and Gospel declaration of Holy Writ,

**The Knowledge of Sin and Its Wages Is Indispensable
for the True Appreciation of the Gospel.**

I.

“*In the [very] words which the Holy Ghost teacheth*” (I Corinthians 2:13), St. Paul sets to paper a statement that is so **clear**, so **unequivocal**, that it neither requires nor permits any interpretation: “*The wages of sin is death.*” In this stark and staggering *sedes doctrinae* (or proof-text of doctrine), the Apostle presents THREE concepts which, taken together in this narrow context, pronounce **everlasting punishment** upon those who even once violate the holy Law of God!

“**SIN**” is not a word coined by self-righteous theologians to make themselves feel good at the expense of others, neither is it a concept whose meaning is so elusive that no one can know for sure what it is, or so subjective that every individual is permitted to define it to suit himself. The Bible tells us in terms so simple that a child can understand them: “*Sin is the transgression of the Law*” (I John 3:4). Sin is “stepping over the line” that separates right from wrong —not the wavy, weaving, broken line that the proverbial “drunken sailor” walks, but the infinitely razor-thin line that separates **perfection** from **imperfection**. GOD says in His Law: “*Ye shall be HOLY, for I, the Lord your God, am HOLY*” (Leviticus 19:2). God is not satisfied if we “do our best,” as many delude themselves into thinking; God expects much more than the “good ol’ college try”; God demands **PERFECTION**, not only in thoughts, desires, words, and deeds, but in our very nature! For He made man in His perfect image in the beginning, and He expected of man “the possible” in the *state of integrity* (before man fell into sin): He expected man to remain holy. Moreover, even ONE infraction of God’s Law violates the perfection that He demands; and, like a chip out of a priceless crystal bowl, a crack in a picture window, or an inclusion in an otherwise flawless diamond, it ruins the whole piece! “*Whosoever shall keep the whole Law, and yet offend in one point,*” writes the Apostle James (2:10), “*he is guilty of ALL!*” And it’s not only the ACT in violation of God’s Law that constitutes sin, but even the FAILURE to act in compliance with God’s Law; for the Bible says concerning *sins of omission*: “*To him that knoweth to do good and doeth it NOT, to him it is SIN*” (James 4:17).

Secondly, the Apostle says here in our text that those who “**SIN**” earn a well-deserved “**wage**” as the result of what they have done. They “*receive the due reward of [their] deeds,*” as the crucified thief freely confessed of the punishment **he** was suffering. Now there are, of course, those who blaspheme God by accusing Him of injustice and cruelty when He metes out punishment upon sinners; but they are the “moral deadbeats” who shirk the responsibility of their own actions, blame others for the consequences of their own sins, and slander God by making

Him out to be unjust when He visits upon them exactly what they **deserve**.

And what does the sinner **deserve** because of his transgression of God's Law? What are the "wages" he has **earned** by his sins of thought, desire, word, and deed, yea, even by his lack of perfection? Paul says in our text: "*The wages of sin is DEATH!*" The blaspheming unbeliever laughs God in the face when he hears this threat; for he sins with impunity: God never struck him with lightning in the midst of his cursing, never visited upon him a fatal coronary during his wanton fornication, never caused the earth to swallow him up because of his lawlessness! The devil himself played that card, so to speak, when he lulled Eve into a false sense of security, saying: "*Ye shall **not** surely die.*" He lied! "*Your iniquities have **separated** between you and your God,*" writes Isaiah (59:2), "*and your sins have hid His face from you that He will not hear.*" DEATH is **SEPARATION**: *SPIRITUAL* DEATH being the separation in this life already of the soul from God because of sin and unbelief; *TEMPORAL* DEATH being the separation of the soul from the body at the end of this earthly life; and *ETERNAL* DEATH being the permanent separation of both soul and body from God in the everlasting, fiery punishment of hell! "*The wages of sin*" is ALL of these! "*By one man sin entered into the world, and DEATH by sin*" (Romans 5:12). As we confess in our Convention Theme: "**Man's sin merits death**" — it's as plain and simple as that!

Now what does the knowledge of these three concepts, taken together, mean for **you and me**; and how does it "**create the need**" for forgiveness, life, and salvation —for the message of the Gospel? The "natural" unconverted sinner, in his enmity against God, is in a constant state of "denial" regarding his sins, his depravity, and his lost condition before God. And, as long as he rejects the indictment of God's Law, he will also despise and reject the Gospel. —But **you and I**, according to our flesh, deny **our** sins too, until the indicting Law of God rings in **our** ears with passages we know only too well, to convince us of **our** lost estate by nature: "*If we say that we have no sin, we **deceive ourselves**, and the truth is not in us*" (I John 1:8). "*ALL have sinned and come short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23). "*We are ALL as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags*" (Isaiah 64:6). "*Therefore by the deeds of the Law there shall **no flesh** be justified in His sight, for by the Law is the knowledge of sin!*" (Romans 3:20). "*The WAGES of sin [your sin and mine] is DEATH,*" says Paul in our text. "*Except ye repent, ye shall ALL likewise perish!*" (Luke 13:3). Again St. Paul in Romans 7: "*The good that I would I do not, but the evil which I would not, that I do. ... O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this **death??***" Or, as the jailer at Philippi cried out to Paul and Silas: "*What must I do to be saved??*" —The Law of God, proclaimed in all its fierceness, creates the **NEED**; for it declares, with no room for maneuvering out of it, that **man's sin merits death**, and without salvation, without rescue, without interference by a Savior outside of our sinful selves, we too would surely die forever! —NOW do we feel the **NEED** for salvation? NOW do we really appreciate the Gospel? Has our proud refusal to accept "charity" finally been overcome by our desperate **NEED** for a Savior?? Oh, then, stricken sinner, hear **these words**:

II.

"**God's grace gives life,**" says the motto of our 51st Annual Convention, OR, as St. Paul writes in our precious Law-and-Gospel text: "*The **gift of God** is **eternal life** through Jesus Christ, our Lord.*" What a wonderful contrast to the **previous** statement!! Indeed, what a SERIES of contrasts the "good cheer" of this Gospel assurance provides! Instead of "wages" we here find a "**gift**" of all things! We can't *EARN* life; we must acknowledge it to be a "**gift**," the "**gift of GOD!**" Another word for an undeserved gift is "**grace**," as we know from Ephesians 2:8-9, where Paul says: "*By **GRACE** are ye saved, through faith, and that, **not of yourselves** [not earned as are "wages"]; *it is the **GIFT OF GOD**, not of works, lest any man should boast.*" We can't *EARN* salvation; for "*if [it be] by grace, then is it no more of works, otherwise grace is no more grace;**

but if it be of works, then is it no more grace, otherwise work is no more work” (Romans 11:6).

And yet this “*gift of God*” did not come without a price! When gifts are given that were not bought and paid for, we call that “shoplifting;” and the ones who get the gift are “receiving stolen property”! The “*gift of God*” was “*bought with a price,*” St. Paul tells us (I Corinthians 6:20); and the Apostle Peter elaborates on that statement, saying: “*Ye know that ye were not **redeemed** with corruptible things as silver and gold from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers*” —bought off with mere money from that empty, vain, sinful and corrupt way of life passed down to you from your earthly parents in original sin as their heritage of death to you! ... “*but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot*” (I Peter 1:18-19) —the sinless Son of God laying down His perfect righteousness at the bar of divine justice in your place and mine, and then paying the penalty of our guilt, “*the wages of sin,*” with His own death upon the cross! “*Christ hath **redeemed** us from the curse of the Law,*” from “*the wages of sin,*” “*being made a curse for us; for it is written: Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree*” (Galatians 3:13).

THAT’S what it took to secure “*the gift of God,*” to satisfy God’s justice that **STILL** demands perfect obedience to His Law and threatens swift and unrelenting punishment for the transgressor! **THAT’S** how “*God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them*” (II Corinthians 5:19). “*For He hath made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might be **made** the righteousness of God in Him*” (v. 21). Thus, “*the **gift** of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord,*” God’s **gift** of eternal life in heaven instead of eternal death in hell, **bought and paid for** by our dear Lord Jesus!

Surely, the knowledge of sin and its wages, declared to us by the **LAW** of God in all its fierceness, is indispensable for the true appreciation of the Gospel; for it creates in us the **NEED** for salvation by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith. There’s simply no other way to obtain it! And now that we have been so wonderfully “*made wise unto salvation*” by the precious **GOSPEL**, by the good news of God’s unilateral forgiveness of the whole world of ungodly and profane sinners “*by grace*” [as His free **gift**], “*for Christ’s sake*” [because **He** paid for that gift, “not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood, and with His innocent suffering and death” (Luther, *Second Article*), **REACH OUT**, my dear fellow sinner, with that undeserving beggar’s hand of faith, to grasp in confidence of God’s promise the “*gift [of] eternal life*” which He has already given to **every sinner**, which He has given to **YOU**, for Jesus’ sake. For it is only *by faith* in what God has **already done** for you in Christ that His perfect righteousness is your “*wedding garment*” that admits you spotless and holy to the feast of **everlasting life** in the mansions of heaven. Thus, we gratefully pray with the hymnwriter:

My guilt, O Father, Thou hast laid
on Christ, Thy Son, my Savior.
Lord Jesus, Thou my debt hast paid
and gained for me God’s favor.
O Holy Ghost, Thou Fount of Grace,
the good in me to Thee I trace;
in faith do Thou preserve me!

Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!

HISTORICAL ESSAY
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