

Priority in Ministry

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Lesson One: God Will Meet All Our Needs

Martin Luther, the Great Reformer, loved Psalm 119, labeling it the “A-B-C of Bible Use.” For good reason! In this Psalm we find many different expressions used for God’s Word. In fact, the term “word” is used 25 times for it. More important, though, is the power which this favorite Psalm ascribes to God’s Word. The Word, as the Psalmist points out, “blesses,” “keeps pure,” “preserves life,” “makes wise,” “lights our path,” “gives understanding,” and brings “great peace.” We don’t have to read between the lines to hear his urging, “Use the word, live in it, follow it, let it power your life and service.”

How can we discuss “priorities in ministry” without turning constantly to that all sufficient Word? It alone works the faith, strength and wisdom necessary for proper ministry and service. The gospel it reveals is the tool which the Spirit uses to bring sinners to faith, increase their faith, and move faith into proper service. The guidance the Word offers shows believers what their lifelong mission is. And the promises it holds forth offer believers confidence and strength to carry out their work even in the most troublesome times.

As individual believers and also as believers gathered together, we cherish the reminder that God’s Word offers what we need, regardless of the times.

God Knows The Problems We, His People, Have

Revelation 2:2, 9, 19:

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance...I know your afflictions and your poverty...I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

These are Jesus’ opening words to three early churches in Ephesus, Smyrna and Thyatira. He addressed these churches with some needed words of advice, comfort and admonition. But note how he began by assuring them that he knew about their hard work and the harsh troubles they had in carrying out his mission.

Jesus, who knows the needs of his church, promises the Father knows also our personal needs. Read Matthew 6:31, 32; then follow with verse 33 for the promise that the Father will take care of our needs. To his first disciples Jesus also spoke of other needs. He told them, “You will weep and mourn while the world rejoices-in this world you will have trouble” (John 16:1-3). Yet with this prediction of trouble came his promise of help, “Your grief will turn to joy ...Take heart!...I have overcome the world.”

Have times changed for believers? Or do they face the same problems Jesus’ disciples and those first churches did, though perhaps in different shapes and sizes? What did Jesus predict in Matthew 24:12 about the love of many? What did Paul foresee in 2 Timothy 3:1-5 and 1 Timothy 4:1-2 from those both inside and outside of the church? Read 2 Timothy 3:12 where Paul in speaking of his own suffering summarized, “in fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

God can turn our needs and problems into blessings. What blessing did he bring out of the early persecution of believers in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1-4)? Can we think of some blessing he has brought us individually through a problem? What blessings might God have in mind for our congregation in the challenges facing it? What blessings from the challenges confronting our church in an increasingly hostile society?

God Promises Help For All Our Needs

Philippians 4:19:

And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

From a prison cell in Rome Paul writes to a congregation which knew about poverty and was experiencing persecution. He didn't write to commiserate with them or ask them to feel sorry for him. He wrote to encourage them to rejoice in the Lord always. (4:4)

Note Paul's encouragement to rejoice in adverse conditions was not some cheer up, chin-up kind of pep talk. Nor was it empty hoping for the best for them or himself in the situation. He based his confidence on a God who had promised to meet all their needs, even as he had already met their greatest need in Christ's payment for their sins. Read also Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 9:8 and note the four "alls" which he used. Then turn to Ephesians 3:20 for a reminder that God can do far more than what we can ask or think. Finally listen to Jesus as he in Matthew 18:19, 20 promises what he will do for those who gather in his name.

To us, too, Paul says, "All your needs." To us, too Jesus promises, "Anything you ask for." What are such unconditional promises so valuable for the church today? Why do we so often lean so weakly on them?

We tend to make artificial distinctions in our personal lives and in the affairs of the church between what God is able to do and what we have to do for ourselves. We know that God cares for our spiritual needs like forgiveness, faith, and eternal life. But do we involve him as deeply as we ought in physical areas like food and finances, budgets and building, planning and proposing? Think of some areas in our personal life and church life where God's promises of help need to be more in the forefront.

God Wants Us To Trust That He Will Provide

1 Peter 5:6, 7, 10, 11:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you ...And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, Arm steadfast. To him be power for ever and ever. Amen

Peter wrote these well known words to first century Christians in congregations of Asia Minor. They were experiencing suspicion, slander, suffering for their faith. Soon bitter persecution would follow. What an invitation God tendered them to trust him in their trouble.

Coupled with God's invitation was his evangelical command, "Humble yourselves." Such humility comes only with God-given faith. As the Spirit through the Word works childlike faith in the heart, humility follows the believer, facing life's needs, admits, "Lord, I can't," and then continues with confidence, "but you can." Humble faith looks to God for help with all the needs of the individual and the church. Humble faith also looks to God for help trusting that it is there even before it is asked for. David spoke of such confidence in Psalm 37:5. So did Paul in Philippians 4:13.

The gates of hell will not overcome it, Jesus assured, speaking of the church of all believers built on him and his word (Mt. 16:1 81). Sometimes hell's attacks against his church have been mounted on grand scale. More often they come in less spectacular and less noticeable fashion. The devil leads members of a congregation to be at odds with one another. He encourages them to elevate one portion of kingdom work at the expense of the other. He breeds distrust and disrespect for spiritual leaders. He moves people to be selfish and withhold gifts for the church's mission. He lures individual Christians toward laziness and away from devotion of time and talent for the ministry of the congregation. What does God's promise of help offer us in such situations? What does his command to be humble have to say about them?

What makes for an effective leader? What approach do Peter's words suggest for the concerns in our individual lives and in the lives of our wider fellowship of believers both in our congregation and in our synod? List some individual concerns you might want to include in your personal prayers. List some corporate concerns you might like included in the combined prayers of the congregation.

Lesson Two: God Wants Us To Set Priorities

Who would dispute that we are a people with much on our minds. Feeding, clothing, housing, educating ourselves and our children take more and more of our effort and income. Surviving in a polluted society, striving to hold together our homes and families, resisting the insidious temptations which surround us on every side make us tired, if not weary and almost defeatist.

Add to this the work of the church. Pushing to make the home church budget, trying to bring up the offerings for the synod and the Lutheran high school, taking care of our buildings, enlisting enough workers for the church's programs, plus a dozen other concerns, add up to a load that can weary the strongest backs and turn away the weaker ones.

What to do? Stop and listen to something Jesus once said, to a dear friend. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things," he told her, "but only one thing is needed" (Luke 10:41). Jesus was not being critical of Martha's love or downplaying her service for him. He was, however, speaking to her about setting priorities. First in importance must always be attention to his Word, the one thing needed. Then service can and will follow

We Must Distinguish Between Symptoms And Underlying Causes

Revelation 3:15-18:

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ...You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. /counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes so you can see."

Jesus was speaking to the church in Laodicea. Outwardly the members appeared to be doing fairly well, but Jesus declared them guilty of the sin of indifference. They had lost their "first love" for his Word and work. The pleasures of this life and the treasures of this world had dulled their sense of spiritual need.

Note how Jesus in his warning went beneath the symptoms to their real need. They needed the gold of his salvation, the robe of his righteousness, the healing of his Spirit. Jesus even went so far as to say that he would rather they were "cold," that is, completely lacking in faith, so they would realize how much they needed his help. They needed to turn to and be enriched by what Jesus offered in his word.

What needs come to mind when we think of our congregation? Poor church attendance, lack of interest in Bible study, minimal financial support, lack of concern for the wider work of the church, decreasing interest and involvement of members in the church's work? Are these real needs or only symptoms? What is the common weakness behind the problems mentioned?

Good leaders need to tell the difference between symptoms and underlying causes. We need to treat the disease if we want lasting relief. What does Jesus' command and promise in Matthew 6:33 say about proper treatment? What direction do his words give to leaders in the church?

Spiritual Weakness Lies Behind Many Apparent Problems

Hebrews 5:11-14

... You are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's Word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! ...But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

The unnamed author was writing to Christians living apparently in Rome. His pastoral heart was concerned about them because they were becoming stagnant in their faith and even in danger of falling away. "You are slow to learn," he scolded them, using a word that meant dulled or numb. Their ears once eager to hear the Word were now dulled and unable to receive deep spiritual truths.

Instead of being teachers by this time in their Christianity, the Hebrews had gone backwards, needing someone to teach them the ABC's again of spiritual truth. They were back at the baby stage where spiritual stomachs could handle only milk. The author desired spiritual growth for them. Such growth could come only through "constant use" of the Word. Read 1 Corinthians 3:1 and note where Paul also put his finger when it came to the problems of the Corinthian church. Turn next to Ephesians 4:14-15 and find a hope Paul had for the church in Ephesus and then back up to verses 11-13 of the same chapter to see how Paul visualized this hope being fulfilled.

What are some ways spiritual weakness manifests itself? Contrast the reaction of the first spies sent to explore Canaan with that of the second spies sent almost 40 years later (Numbers 13:31-33, Joshua 2:24) and explain the difference. What happens when God's people look away from him and his sure promises to only themselves in the face of their work and opposition? Read Jesus' warning words in Luke 16:13. What happens when God's people seek to serve him with divided loyalty? Think of other problems which spiritual weakness may breed.

Read Professor Paul's words to Pastor Titus in 2:11-15. Where is that "grace of God that brings salvation" to be found in rich supply? What was Titus to teach so that believers would "say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions" and "live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age," even as they wait for "the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ"? Leaders, even as they analyze the problems caused by spiritual weakness, need to point people to the only solution.

God's Word Provides For The Church's Greatest Need

Colossians 1:9-12:

For this cause, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.

Paul's prayer for the church at Colossae is a classic. It sets forth his desire and their need for growth in spiritual wisdom and understanding. It details the results of such growth—living "a life worthy of the Lord," pleasing "him in every way," joyfully giving thanks to him." It stresses the only motivating force for such a life — "the redemption, the forgiveness of sins," we have in "the Son he loves."

Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Peter urged his readers (2 Peter 3:18). In the original he actually said, "Keep on growing." Such growth was to be a lifelong process. In 2 Peter 1:16-21 Peter, even though he had been in the select group which had seen Christ's glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, referred his readers to the "more sure" word given by God's inspiration. The word was there to build up their faith. Will we be a growing, working and witnessing church if we consider confirmation as graduation from Bible study? Are the ideas that education is for children only, religion is only something to die by, and mission work is only for ministers compatible with a lifelong priority of the "one thing needed"?

How is our parish "growing in grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ"? How many members are participating in Bible study forums? How many worship weekly? Are our youth staying with the church? What can we do as leaders to help growth occur through the Word? Do we personally use the word?

Lesson Three: God's Word Works The Most Needed Change

Once we realize that spiritual weakness lies behind many congregational problems, we also reach the conclusion that re-creating and strengthening faith is the most important work we have. The Scriptures make it very clear how faith is worked. There is only one way, the Holy Spirit's activity in the human heart through God's Word with its gospel message of salvation in Christ Jesus.

That powerful word not only creates faith; it also sustains and strengthens it. We may ask for stronger faith in our prayers but those prayers will be unanswered if we do not use the Word of God. We may exercise our faith in a life of daily good works, but eventually our energy and resolve will run low if we do not return repeatedly to the Word. The Word presents the gospel of Jesus which creates and rejuvenates faith and motivates every activity of Christian life at home, at work and in the church.

If Christian leaders want to concentrate on addressing the underlying cause of weakness in their parish, they will look for ways to bring the word of the gospel as often as possible to as many as possible.

God's Word Creates And Recreates Faith

James 1:17-18:

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights who does not change, like the shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created."

James was writing to Jewish Christians scattered from Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen. He wrote to encourage them in Christian living. In our verses he directed them to an unchanging Father who never gives his children anything but good gifts. For an example he pointed to the greatest gift of all, the gift of faith.

James referred to three truths in speaking of the gift of faith. It comes by God's choosing, he says, not our doing. He gave birth to us; we did nothing. Compare Jesus' words in John 15:16. Secondly God worked our regeneration "through the word of truth." Read Colossians 1:5 and note how Paul identifies that word of truth as the gospel. Read also Paul's words in Romans 1:16 where the gospel is identified as God's power to blast open human hearts and plant faith and trust in all that has been won for the sinner by Christ. Finally note the results of the Father's gift of faith. We become the "first fruits of all he created." Others are his creatures; we are his family. The world is his goods; we are his treasure. All this because his Spirit works faith in us through that powerful Word!

Can faith be lost? Is the expression "once a believer always a believer" correct? Must the Father send his Spirit more than once to people, not only to create faith, but to re-create it? Read Paul's urgings to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:19) and his warning to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 10:12). Turn to David for a graphic example of faith re-created (2 Samuel 12:13). Then read Romans 10:17 for a reminder of the one way faith comes.

Christian leaders, knowing that God's Word works faith, are concerned about the use of that Word. What steps are taken in our congregation to keep people close to the powerful Word? How do we identify those in need? How long do we wait when someone has not attended worship services? How do we approach them, with talk about "coming to church" or about faith's need for the Word's power? On what do we rely in our outreach efforts? Warm and friendly people, well kept church buildings and grounds, well structured and meaningful worship services, or the Word? All of the aforementioned are commendable, but only the Word works in the human heart.

God's Word Strengthens Faith

Acts 20:32

Now I commit you to God and to the Word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

On the way to Jerusalem Paul spoke with the church leaders of Ephesus for what appeared to be the last time. Concerned about them and the people they served, Paul had a special prayer for them.

Look at the content of his prayer. He asked God to build them up spiritually in this life and to give them the inheritance in the life to come. Only God could do such blessed work. That's why Paul commended those people to him. The means God would use to build them up was the "Word of his grace." That's why Paul pointed them so strongly to the Word. Read also Colossians 3:17. The believers use of God's Word is to be no

“now you do it, now you don’t” activity, no “hit or miss” affair. Hearts and lives were to be wide open regularly with room for the blessed Word and its strengthening power.

In Matthew 8:10 we have an example of faith which Jesus praised. In Romans 4:18-20 Paul advances the example of Abraham’s astonishing faith. Both examples have one thing in common - God’s powerful Word with its precious promises. That Word both offers and operates. Through it the Spirit works to strengthen faith’s grasp on God’s promises. Luke 17:5 is a good prayer for parish leaders. Does the pastor have to preach the “same old thing” each Sunday? Have we “heard it all before” so that we don’t have to be in a rush to come to worship? Will we miss out on anything if we skip a day of Bible reading or a worship opportunity? In Romans 1:16 Paul said that he was not ashamed of the gospel for it was the power of God for salvation. Neither will Lutheran leaders today be ashamed of its power.

Agree or disagree: we cannot add to the power of God’s Word, but we can detract from it. What might be some ways detraction takes place? How might we proclaim God’s ever effective word more effectively in our congregation?

God’s Word Motivates And Directs Us For Lives Of Service

2 Timothy 3:16-17

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Paul was writing from his prison cell in Rome to Pastor Timothy whom he had trained and who was now in charge of the churches in Ephesus. The imprisoned veteran urged the young pastor to continue in God’s Word which he had started learning from infancy. Not only would those Scriptures make him wise unto salvation, but also “thoroughly equip” him and every Christian for “every good work.”

We look particularly at one use of Scripture which Paul mentioned - “training in righteousness.” “Training” brings to mind the picture of a child who needs to be guided and encouraged, disciplined and corrected in order to grow up into a useful citizen. “Righteousness” refers to the life of sanctification, to living for Christ who bought us and to carrying out his mission in our lives. For this a believer needs constant guidance and encouragement. And that Paul says comes only from the Scriptures which God has given us so marvelously.

Christians are both consumers and partners. They come to the Word to receive what they need. Again and again they need to hear and treasure the blessed truths, “God loves me. God takes care of me. God will take me to heaven.” But those same Christians also need to hear and act upon another truth, “God sends me.” Repeatedly they need to hear the Master say, “Go, work for me. I have so much for you to do.” Read John 9:4 and note the urgency in Jesus’ words. Read Matthew 28:19-20, John 20:21-23, Luke 24:47-48 to learn what the mission is for which Christ recruits and empowers believers.

Why are there so many in the church who only want to “hitch a ride”? Are there any quick fixes for this problem? Why must the Word ever be at the heart and center of whatever programs we employ or methods we use in promoting the sanctification life in the church? What roles do leaders fill in carefully examining any method or program to be used?

Mission is knowing who we are and what God expects us to do and where to find the strength to do it. See if you can find those three thoughts in the Mission Statement of our synod, “As men, women and children united in faith and worship by the Word of God, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod exists to make disciples throughout the world for time and for eternity, using the gospel to win the lost for Christ and to nurture believers for lives of Christian service, all to the glory of God.”

Lesson Four: God’s Word Comes To Us In Many Ways

Ever wonder about those early Christians? Just a few short years after the Lord had charged them to make disciples of all nations, we find the gospel carried already to far off Rome. By the end of the first century the regions around the Mediterranean Sea had already been evangelized. How did those believers do it? They

weren't super Christians. A cursory reading of the New Testament book of Acts and of the epistles reveals divisions and disputes among them, problems with doctrine and practice, immaturity and immorality, all of which needed to be addressed and corrected. Nor was their world radically different. The society in which they lived was as wicked as the world has ever seen. Remember also that they did not have the modern tools and means of transportation and communication at their beck and call. How did they do it?

The answer is nothing mysterious. They lived in the Word! They were converted and confirmed, controlled and commissioned by the Spirit as he worked through the gospel in Word and sacraments. Hearing and reading the Word, mediating and studying it personally, sharing it with friends and spreading it wherever they went, powered by it in Baptism and the Lord's Supper, they used the Word. Of the first congregation in Jerusalem we read, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). They "devoted" or kept adhering strongly to the life-giving and powering Word.

Many things have changed since that first congregation was formed in Jerusalem, but one remains the same. The Spirit still works through the Word and the Word still comes to us in many ways.

God's Word Comes Through Preaching, Teaching, Reading And Sharing

Acts 10:33:

So I sent for you immediately and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.

It was in the early days of the New Testament church with outreach to the Gentiles just getting started. The Spirit has directed Peter to the city of Joppa, to the home of Centurion Cornelius.

In Cornelius' home an ideal congregation of relatives and friends had been gathered. The Spirit had sent Peter to proclaim the Word and the people were eager to listen. This is just one of many accounts in Acts of how God's Word came. On Pentecost in Jerusalem the apostles shared "the wonders of God" to an international crowd of more than 3,000 (Acts 2:14). At Troas in a crowded upper room Paul talked and even kept going till midnight (Acts 20:7). Philip the Evangelist bumped along in a chariot down a desert road with the eunuch of Ethiopia in order to "tell him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). At Ephesus Priscilla and Aquila invited a budding church worker named Apollos into their home and "explained to him the way of God more adequately" (Acts 18:26). God's Word comes through preaching, teaching, reading, sharing.

Why are we so quick to limit the Word to that book on the pulpit and lectern of our church? The Word is the Word and has power whether spoken from the pulpit or by the workbench, when people pick up the Bible or when a tract is fished out of the gutter and read, when presented on the video screen or sung on a child's record.

What were some ways God's Word was brought to us in our childhood? Why should we work hard at getting families into the Word if we want to do something for the children of our congregations? What are some ways we hear and use God's Word in our congregations? What additional ways might our congregation explore of sharing that Word with members together and individually? What are some modern tools we can utilize in getting the Word out in our church, community, world?

God's Word Comes Through Personal Devotions

Psalms 1:2: "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night."

This first of the psalms speaks of the "truly happy man." He is one who spends time with the "law of the Lord." Here, as in many passages, "law" refers to the whole Word of God, both law and gospel. Another translation might be "instruction."

Notice the believer's reaction to God's Word. He finds his greatest joy in the gospel which tells him of God's forgiveness of his sins. But then he also delights in God's commands because in love he wants to know and do what pleases the God who has loved him so much.

Notice a second reaction of the believer to God's Word. "He meditates day and night" on it. The word "meditate" pictures the low hum as the believer half-aloud reads and rereads to himself the precious words of his God. It's a healthy interest in and regular use of that precious Word which the Psalmist ascribes to the happy man.

How big is our Bible? We can only live by the part of the Bible we know. Martin Luther put it this way, "in truth, you cannot read too much in Scripture; and what you read you cannot read too carefully; and what you read carefully you cannot understand too well; and what you understand well you cannot teach too well; and what you teach well you cannot live too well." Joshua's urging (1:8), Jesus' command (John 5:39) and the Bereans' example (Acts 17:11) encourage us to personal reading of the Scriptures and point out some of the benefits which follow.

Serious Bible reading requires a time exposure, not a snapshot approach. Like piano playing it takes practice. What benefits have we derived from our personal use of Scripture? What kind of methods or materials have we used? What have been some of the hindrances to our reading? How might our congregation help us with them? What kind of materials might aid us? How much use have we made of the "Peoples' Bible" in our own and our congregational study?

God's Word Comes To Us In The Sacraments

Ephesians 5:25-26:

...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water through the Word...

Matthew 26:26-27:

... Take and eat, this is my body... Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

These passages speak of the two sacraments, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Paul spoke of Baptism as a means by which we receive the cleansing of forgiveness. In his institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus also spoke of the forgiveness of sins.

Note the emphasis on God's Word. Paul wrote, "The washing of water through the Word." Jesus connected his Word of promise about forgiveness with the Supper. Apart from God's gospel Word connected with them, the sacraments are nothing. The sacraments offer no blessings but those the Word itself brings. They achieve the same ends as the Word. They create and/or strengthen our faith in God's forgiveness along with all the resulting blessings. And they do this only because of the Word connected with them. In the sacraments God takes the individual apart from the crowd to assure him most intimately and personally that Christ's merits were won also for him. Not only do the sacraments offer this treasure, but they also create and strengthen the faith to receive such gifts. All this only through the Word!

Is Baptism to be limited only to that moment at the baptismal font? Read Romans 6:3-4 and note how Paul used baptism to power us for the daily ten-rounder between the New Man and the Old Adam and to comfort us when we are bruised in the battle. Read Ephesians 5:25-26 and note how Paul refers to baptism to empower us in love for our spouse and others by reminding us of Christ's great love for us. Now read Acts 2:42 and note how the early church used Holy Communion ("breaking bread"). Part of the strength of the early church came from that Table where a loving God in a unique way opens his loving heart to warm cooling ones with the assurance of his forgiveness and of resulting strengthening for a believer's love and life.

Have we always viewed the sacraments as mighty acts of God by which he comes to us and would do great things for us? How might we correct the mistaken notion that we bring our babies to baptism, we go to

communion, to do something for God, to fulfill our church membership requirements? When's the last time we thought of our baptism or used its promise or its power for our daily life? How might our church help us to do this? What should encourage our frequent attendance at the Lord's Table? How do we go about encouraging the use of the Sacrament of the Altar in our church?

Lesson Five: The Church's Leaders Work With God's Word

For what should we look when choosing leaders in the church? Is the emphasis to be on ability, on how well they manage, delegate or organize? Is the stress to be on their approach to leadership whether they direct, involve, coordinate, keep hands off, or a combination of the same?

It's interesting to note where Scripture places the emphasis. In 1 Peter 5:3 the church's leaders are urged to be humble, not lording it over those entrusted to their care. Like the Chief Shepherd they are to lead with genuine concern for the flock's well-being. In Philippians 3:7-8 they are described as having a sacrificial spirit. Treasuring what they have been given in Christ, they are willing to give us all to keep it and to share it with others. In 1 Corinthians 15:58 they are urged to be hard working, confident people. Knowing the glorious truths of Christ's resurrection, they willingly lift their heads from their pillows and square away their shoulders for the work which he has given them.

More frequently the Bible puts the emphasis on what leaders are rather than on what they do, on their spiritual condition instead of their natural abilities.

Sounds like those who lead in the church are to be spiritual people. Or to put it another way, they are to be leaders who work with the Word.

Those Who Lead God's Church Live In His Word

Exodus 18:21:

Select capable men from all the people - men who fear God.

Acts 6:3:

Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit.

The first passage was spoken by Moses' father-in-law. Moses needed help in leading Israel and Jethro advised him to look for "men who fear God." The second passage was spoken by the Twelve when help was needed in the early days of the church, The church in Jerusalem was to select men who were "known to be full of the Spirit."

Notice how similar both phrases are. Both Jethro and the Twelve were speaking about men whose eyes had seen the King, whose hearts were stamped with love for his Word and work, who had their priorities straight and practiced accordingly by seeking first God's kingdom. Christian leaders of any kind are to be consecrated leaders.

How does such consecration come about? Paul in 1 Timothy 4:6 urged the young pastor to be "brought up in the truths of the faith." The apostle used a word which meant to be nourished and indicated ongoing action: "Continue in what you have learned," he also told Timothy (2 Timothy 3:14). Hear what Paul was telling him - and all who would lead in any way in the church. "To the Word," he stressed, "keep on being fed by it, don't ever stop. You need that Word for yourself and for those whom you would lead." Read also Jeremiah 15:16 and Psalm 63:1 for a Christian leader's reaction to the Word.

The order of installation for a church council in the *Lutheran Agenda* states, "You are, as servants of Christ and officers of his church, to set your own households and the whole congregation an example of a devout Christian life." Later that order also charges, "Make the word of God your guide, and search it daily for instruction." Why is it so important that only men who live in the Word are picked for leadership positions? How can men who do not live in the Word be examples to others? What about their attendance at worship services, Bible classes, and other forums? What about biblically based studies at our church board meetings?

What have we done in such studies? What might we study? What we do as church leaders speak more loudly than what we say.

Those Who Leads God's Church Guide With His Word

Matthew 28:19-20

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

These well known words spoken by the risen Lord on that mountain top in Galilee are his marching orders to the church. Called "the great commission," they clearly outline the work of his church.

Note that Jesus spoke of two activities - proclaiming and preserving his Word. Both are important. Again and again the Savior commanded that his Word be proclaimed to the nations as Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47-48, Acts 1:8 with words like "all creation," "to all nations," and "to the ends of the earth," indicate.

Again and again the Lord also commanded that his Word be preserved. John 8:31, 17:17, Luke 11:28 urge holding to the Word, obeying it, and the blessed results when we do.

The church's work may be summarized with the terms "outreach" and "nurture." A church that treasures the truth will want to reach out with it to others. Read Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:13 to catch his spirit. Also a church which treasures the truth will want to root its members as deeply as possible in it. Read Paul's words to the elders at Ephesus (Acts 20:27) and to Timothy (2 Timothy 3:14) to catch his concern about growing in and protecting the truth. Reaching out with the Word to a world which doesn't have it and nurturing believers so that they know, follow, and preserve all the Word says - that's the work with which Christ has charged his church.

Does our congregation have a Mission Statement in which our work is summarized? If so, what does that statement reflect about our understanding of the church's work? What takes the bulk of the time in our council, congregational, budget meetings - our work of nurturing our members or the outreach reach to be done in our community and through our synod? Why? What can be done about it? How can leaders help our members strive for a balance between nurture and outreach? Why should leaders do this? What about a leader's personal example in offerings, evangelism work, supporting the wider work of the church? Again actions speak louder than words!

Those Who Lead God's Church Deserve Respect

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

...Respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

In the second half of this letter Paul offered a series of encouragements and instructions to his readers at Thessalonica. Included was his exhortation to honor their spiritual leaders. Though Scripture says much about the qualifications and responsibilities of spiritual leaders, it has little to say about our reactions to them. So we listen to Paul with extra attention. What he has to say about the pastors and teachers at Thessalonica can be applied to other spiritual leaders as well.

"Respect them," Paul said, "because of their hard work among you." "Hold them in highest regard in love," he continued, again for the same reason, "because of their work." Also he encouraged respect because those leaders "are over you in the Lord." Notice how Paul focused not on the leader's personality but the important work in the Word with which God had entrusted them. Read also Hebrews 13:7, 17 to learn what form proper respect takes for faithful leaders.

We live in an age which is increasingly more critical of anyone and anything and which questions authority ever more frequently. Such an attitude filters also into the church. A fine line exists between being

critical and being concerned. Being concerned involves getting as much information as possible, putting the best construction possible on actions and statements before voicing genuine concerns in a positive way. Shame on any leader who would not listen to such concerns.

Two phrases in Paul's encouragement to the Thessalonian church rule out unjust and undue criticism. He spoke of holding leaders in the highest regard "in love." He encouraged Christians to "live in peace" with each other. Lack of peace and love in a congregation makes the work of its leaders more difficult. It also hinders outreach to the community for it is a contradiction of the gospel we seek to share. Moreover,, it hurts the members for hearts at odds with fellow members will not be very receptive to Christ's gospel of love and forgiveness.

Can Christian leaders be faithful and still avoid all criticism? What unpopular decisions needed to be made in our church this past year? For what will leaders ask when faced with doctrinal problems, discipline cases, etc.? How will the regular use of God's Word aid leaders in such decisions?

How does our congregation show respect and love for its leaders? How often is our congregation asked to pray for them and by whom? How often do we speak words of encouragement and appreciation to them? What do things like our attendance at voters' meetings, our input to issues confronting our church and its leaders say about our desire to help those who lead? Bold and humble, strong and faithful, loving and concerned leaders need the support and respect of those whom they lead. Such support and respect are generated only by the Word!

Lesson Six: God's Word Gives Sure Hope

"I sure hope so." Who of us hasn't heard that statement? Ask a student if he'll pass the exam and you might get that answer. But this hope needs to be based on regular preparation and solid review. Ask a parent if his child is going to amount to something and again that answer. But such hope needs the undergirding of concerned and concentrated parenting. Ask a vacationer if his vehicle will make it across the country and again you'll hear of hope. But that hope depends on a program of regular maintenance and pre-trip inspection. Without a solid basis, hope is flimsy speculation or fanciful dreaming.

The believer also hopes. He hopes for forgiveness, help in trouble, success in his kingdom efforts, final glory in heaven. Nor does he hope in vain. He can say, "I sure hope so" and mean it. Why? Because his hope rests on the solid rock of God's eternal Word.

In our final lesson we will look at how important and comforting it is for us to have the sure hope of God's Word for our lives and work as Christians.

God's Word Gives Sure Hope For The Success Of Our Ministry

Isaiah 55:10-11:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my Word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

Isaiah in this chapter issued a fervent call to the Gentiles and to Israel to repent and share in the wondrous peace and joy found only in God's grace. In the midst of the chapter the prophet reminds us how such repentance is worked and how divine peace and joy are brought - through God's Word.

When God sends the rain and snow, and he alone sends them when and where he wants to, they do not return to heaven without accomplishing his intended purposes. How much more so with his Word. Note how he describes that Word. How does 2 Timothy 3:16 explain the phrase "goes out from my mouth"? Why is that Word "living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12)? Since the Word is his, it must fulfill its task!

Find two expressions in Isaiah's words which point out who determines what the Word accomplishes. Read then verse 13 of Isaiah 55 and see what God wants his Word to bring. But note the One whose Word it is

determines where and to whom the Word brings this. Read also 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 where Paul stressed the same important truth to believers who were dividing up into factions. Who does Paul say “makes it grow”? To whom then do we look for success when we spread his Word? To whom do we give the glory when it springs up in the human heart and life?

Read Jesus’ parable of the sower and the seed in Matthew 13:3-8, 18-23. How discouraging and futile sowing the seed of God’s Word would be if there were only the first three kinds of soil. What keeps us going in kingdom work is Jesus’ promise that some seed does fall on soil which produces a crop. The illustration of the sower and seed is a good one. What can the sower only do? Who determines where the seed All take root and how much fruit it will produce? So also with the Word.

Have we ever been disappointed in our kingdom efforts? Was it because we forgot our role of sowing and God’s role of making it grow? Do we practice “punch and grow” kind of seeding where we want almost instant success? How often have we approached that prospect on our list or that neighbor on our street? Being friendly can bring us closer to people, but what must be sown if anything spiritual is to grow? What temptations does the church face when growth is slow or difficult? What gimmicks have some churches used to bring about visible growth? What do such efforts reveal about confidence in the Word to bring the success God intends for kingdom efforts?

God’s Word Gives Sure Hope For Our Present Problems

Romans 8:31-32

...If God is for us, who can be against us? He, who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Paul’s words are part of the golden chapter 8 of Romans where he exults in God’s amazing love for us. God’s love is so awesome because it has already given us the best ever - sure salvation through faith in the atoning sacrifice of his Son Jesus. Such unparalleled love Paul points out can be trusted to give us whatever else we need and to keep us safe regardless what we face. Read also Hebrews 13:6 for the beautiful reason why the believer works in this world and walks toward heaven’s shores unafraid.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:54-58 and consider the close connection between working hard for the Lord and the source of power to do this even in the face of problems. Only those who stand in Jesus’ Easter victory and on his eternal Word can give themselves fully to his work. Note also Paul spoke of “labor,” of toil and sweat. Then consider what promise he made about such “labor in the Lord.”

To what should leaders of the church turn more frequently when faced with problems? Why are we more inclined to focus on problems instead of reaching for his power? Why are there anemic Christians in our churches? Can they be shamed or beaten into service? What alone can fill them with desire, power, confidence to be about their Father’s business? How might we bring the power of that Word more effectively to them?

God’s Word Gives Sure Hope For Our Eternal Salvation

Titus 2:13-14

“...we wait for the blessed hope -the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”

Paul was writing to a pastor/companion whom he had sent to the island of Crete to organize the church there, admonish the trouble makers, and encourage the faithful in Christian living.

Notice where Paul lifted their eyes - up to the Savior who had redeemed them and who was coming to claim them for his eternal glory. For him the believer waits in sure hope, but not in a padded recliner. What does

Paul say believers will be eager to do? Why will they be eager to live and work for him even as they wait for his return?

In Hebrews 10:23 the author urged believers in difficult times, “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” With what does he closely link our sure hope of eternal salvation? What does he tell us to do with that hope for ourselves and for others? The times are tough, the task is difficult, but the world still needs our clear proclamation of the sure hope of eternal salvation in Christ. What does 1 Peter 3:15 also tell us to do with that hope?

Read Paul’s prayer in Romans 15:13, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Why is that a good prayer for leaders to use for those they lead and for those who are led to use for their leaders? Reread Romans 10:17 for to see how such prayers will be answered for those who lead and those who are led only when they stay close to God’s Word.

Precious Jesus, I beseech Thee,
May Thy words take root in me;
May this gift from heav’n enrich me
So that I bear fruit for Thee
Take them never from my heart
Till I see Thee as Thou art,
When in heav’nly bliss and glory
I shall greet Thee and adore Thee.”
(TLH 29 6:4)