

Reclaiming Our Christ-Centered Lutheran Devotional Heritage

Part 1: Drawing Our Devotional Life from the Gospel



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Professor Rich Gurgel

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INTRODUCTION

I am not a Zen Master. If you are familiar with Zen Buddhism, it is the branch of Buddhism which focuses on meditation as the pivotal skill of spirituality. The Zen Master is the expert in meditation who instructs the novice monks how to meditate rightly in order to merge with the divine.

I am not a Lutheran version of a Zen Master. I am a recovering despiser of Word and prayer who again and again in my conscience has felt the bitter shame of a devotional life that is in shambles. It is a shame made all the more intense since my calling in the public ministry often finds me (as now) encouraging others to make time for Word and prayer. “Physician, heal yourself!” (Luke 4:23)

I fully understand why Luther began his brief treatise on the devotional life (*A Simple Way to Pray*) with these words: “I shall do my best to let you know how I go about praying. May our gracious Lord help you and others do it better than I. Amen.” (Luther 1983, 5)

But Luther did not end his treatise with that prayer. It was his greeting, not his votum! Although he knew full well and confessed the frequent deficiencies of his own devotional life, he did not refrain from writing. If through trial and error, through repeated struggle and being restored by the grace of God, he had learned to grasp both the challenge and the joy of the devotional life, then write he must in answer to the request of Peter, his barber, who longed for encouragement in Word and prayer.

While my barber, or you my brothers in pastoral ministry, have made no such direct request that this particular series of essays be written², yet in trust in God’s grace I am stumbling in the oversized footprints of our spiritual father by sharing what God has been teaching me now for 53 years about Word and prayer. Yes, I will confess that the school of devotional life has been in session far more often through my failures than through successes.

But even though I have no direct request from my barber, I have another reason for writing that Luther didn’t have! From Luther, and from many other Lutheran spiritual fathers and mothers, a rich, gospel-centered Lutheran culture of personal Word and prayer has been handed down to us. While the

¹ This essay is the first of a five part series. The next three parts after this one focus one by one on helping us understand a Lutheran approach to the three ways Luther believed God grows a theologian: *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *tentatio*. The last part of the series is a resource packet that a pastor can use to plan ways to strengthen his personal time in Word and prayer. That last part also includes a growing list of books and schedules that some pastors have found useful for their devotional life.

² These essays are, however, being written as additional fruit of a request that was received. I am grateful to the called-worker brothers and sisters of the South Atlantic District, who provided me with the privilege of presenting a three day workshop in October 2012. The study and preparation that request necessitated, and the honest responses to a preliminary survey that more than 150 provided, went a long way in preparing for these essays.

Lutheran devotional life is not the doctrine by which the church stands or falls, what has flowed from our Lutheran focus on the doctrine of justification *sola gratia* is a Christ-centered, grace revealing heritage that has been laid out for us in great simplicity and yet with equally great depth of biblical understanding. At the heart of this heritage is an understanding that our devotional life is all gift, all grace. This devotional heritage springs from the sobering knowledge of our inherited, daily and desperate need for the grace of God, but more than anything this heritage is built on the exhilarating truth that God longs even more eagerly to overwhelm us with the super-abounding answer of that grace that is ours solely in our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is with a deep sense of thanksgiving to God for those who have gone before us, and with an abiding confidence that to extol God's grace in Word and prayer is the God-honoring privilege of any sinner/saint, that these essays are laid before you. The goal is simple: to help us all to grasp just a bit more firmly the beauty of our Christ-centered Lutheran devotional heritage so that we might learn day by day to put it to work for the benefit of our own souls and the souls entrusted to our care.

DRAWING OUR DEVOTIONAL LIFE FROM THE GOSPEL

Attempt to put yourself in the place of a 7th century BC resident of Jerusalem as the LORD through the prophet Isaiah fires this ballistic missile toward your heart.

- ¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom;
listen to the law of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
- ¹¹ “The multitude of your sacrifices—
what are they to me?” says the LORD.
“I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.
- ¹² When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?
- ¹³ Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—
I cannot bear your evil assemblies.
- ¹⁴ Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts
my soul hates.
They have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them. (Isaiah 1:10–14)

If we indeed were one of the original intended targets of these words, is there anything in what God says to which our natural defensiveness would almost leap to counter? “Who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts?” Was God suffering from amnesia! “Lord, didn’t **you** ask this of us!” Wouldn’t that have been the obvious response that would have leapt to mind? All these offerings and festivals and assemblies were not Israel’s idea (how often they had longed to be rid of them all!), but their God

had demanded this of them. And so they did it. What nerve for God to lump them in with the pagans of Sodom and Gomorrah whose feet had never trod the courts of God's own temple!

But of course God was not suffering from amnesia. He understood, even when Israel didn't, that the beginning of Israel's apostasy from the LORD did not occur when the temple doors were nailed shut, but when its courts were crowded. How does it happen that carrying out worship becomes "trampling" God's courts? How do divinely commanded offerings become "meaningless" and the required sweet-smelling incense become "detestable"? That is precisely what happens in the relationship between God and man when the *rite* things are done for the *rote* reason.

We catch another glimpse of the same problem much later in Jerusalem's history in Malachi 1 when we hear the people of Judah fuss about worship at the temple with all its requirements: "What a burden! and you sniff at it contemptuously". (Malachi 1:13). Such is always the end result when God's people see their forms of worship as grievous burdens God has laid on them rather than seeing their gospel heart: as opportunities to be surrounded by God-given means through which God seals and strengthens his gracious saving purpose for them. When believing hearts begin to approach forms of worship as burdens grudgingly fulfilled, very soon, as the context clearly shows in Isaiah 1, heart and life will make it painfully evident that God and his grace have ceased to be the focus and the delight. Eventually, as the history of Israel often showed, most would abandon altogether that which had become a burdensome charade. What a pitiful missing of the point: as the gracious gifts of the divinely appointed temple worship — designed to bind sinners to his grace — became by human distortion a cause of growing division between God and his people. If only they would come to see again what it was all about: sinners in desperate need of divine grace being gifted with a God even more eager to redeem them! But, for most, this was the sad epithet: seeing they did not see and hearing they did not hear!

Perhaps the comparison is painfully obvious. Transfer this from Old Testament times to New Testament, make a second shift from corporate worship to private, and you will have arrived at what is often the greatest challenge standing between us and finding our delight in personal Word and prayer. It is so easy to allow our devotional life to be driven by the law rather than to draw our strength from the gospel! I must confess how often I have allowed Word and prayer to be nothing but duty, with precious little delight. It easily begins to feel like all legal obligation, with little gospel inspiration. It becomes just another bothersome "to do" on an already overloaded life and ministry list of things to get done on any given day. It morphs into a burden to be quickly dispensed with if it is endured at all.

Such a law-dominated approach to Word and prayer places us in a spiritual catch-22. When we fail to fulfill this "obligation," our conscience is gripped by a sense of failure for having neglected Word and prayer.

Or worse, when we do fulfill this "obligation," how easy to fall into the self-delusion that we are doing some great and wonderful favor for God about which he must be utterly delighted. Time in Word and prayer becomes another brick in the wall of our own little delusional self-justification project (all of which, ironically, succeeds only in building a potential divide between us and our gracious God!). How easily we can convince ourselves that we are doing some great favor for God when we allow him to have a bit of our precious time in our already over-crowded schedule. How honored he must be!

Actually, how appalling it must all appear to him! And suddenly, there we are with Israel, doing the *rite* thing for the *rote* reason, stunned to hear God describe our service to him as meaningless offerings and trampling with our big muddy sinner-feet all over his holy sanctuary.

And as long as we cling to a legalistic “Now, what *else* do we have to do for God today?” mentality, we will conjure up no end of silly law-based arguments, some of which are unique creations of the minds of called public ministers. “So, *how much* time *does* he expect? Can’t he see I’m really busy with all kinds of God-stuff already?” “Hey, what do you mean time in Word and prayer for my own faith is critical for my spiritual health, doesn’t all this contact with the Word for preaching and teaching count for anything?” Just ponder the legalistic origins of such arguments. It’s like children complaining that they’ve already practiced their piano lesson sufficiently for the week, only to be told to go sit at the piano and do some more. So, grudgingly, they go plunk out a few more discordant tones. “There!!! Happy *now* heavenly Father?”

Yes, such faulty approaches to the whole concept of personal Word and prayer, such legalistic concepts of what we have to “do for God” can beat in the hearts of good *sola gratia* Lutherans. Luther was right; the gospel is a rare guest in the human heart while the law is our ready companion. In every area of Christian life, the danger of falling into one version or another of our own “self-justification” project is always as close as the reasonings of the natural sinful heart that beats within us all. And nowhere may such “self-justification” be more deadly than when it rears its ugly head in how we view our time in Word and prayer. For here it can either get us to be proud about the very action that seeks to shower us with his grace, or it can lead us with guilty consciences to flee the Word in which the gospel is found!

The problem with the Pharisees was their misplaced, proud reliance on their own righteousness (Luke 18:9). They were guilty of self-delusion by refusing to acknowledge their status as beggars before God and recipients of His gifts.

We face the same danger in our spiritual lives. We quite readily imagine that we are actors performing before God to gain His applause rather than beggars receiving His gifts. (Kleinig 2008, 37)

[Luther] recognized that by our practice of piety we try to justify ourselves before God and before others. We all too readily regard the life of meditation and prayer as something that we have to do apart from Christ and His presence with us. We think of our devotions as our duty or work, our achievement and the product of our determination and self-discipline. And that assumption sets us up for failure and spiritual disillusionment. (Kleinig 2008, 12)

When we allow our thinking to be influenced by the idea that our devotional life is a performance God demands of us, we will either be living in the fog of pride or the disillusionment of guilt. In the midst of his own confession of stumbling to this thinking, Professor Forest Bivens warns us:

I have learned, too often the hard way, that the devotional life is primarily to be viewed from the standpoint of *God’s devotion to me* rather than my devotion to him. You should too. Don’t waste time and energy thinking otherwise. (Bivens 2008, 2)

But, we might argue, *don’t* the second and third commandments, as they speak of honoring God’s name and God’s Word, command our devotion to Word and prayer? Yes. A thousand times yes. And in a fallen world what is the primary purpose of that message of God’s law? Most of all the 2nd Commandment renders me without excuse before God whose name I have refused to hallow by calling on him in every trouble, praying, praising, and giving thanks. Most of all the 3rd Commandment renders me speechless (Romans 3:19) for playing the hypocritical fool who is too often trying to lead others to

drink the water of life while my own soul is parched! Scriptural statements to “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and that I “should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1) seem to mock me with their unattainability and reduce to tatters my pride in my weak and wobbly prayer mumblings. The fact that Scripture urges me to “pray for everyone” (1 Timothy 2:1) serves to present me with long lists of people for whom I’ve promised to pray, so many of whom have a right to launch a class action lawsuit against me for breach of contract. Paul’s encouragement to let the Word of God dwell in me richly (Colossians 3:16) convicts me of poverty for having repeatedly put out the “no vacancy” sign at the door of my heart.

But by themselves none of those biblical truths has even the least ounce of power to change the attitude of my heart or alter my behavior (at least for long).

As you well know, the answer to this dilemma comes from the completely opposite direction. Into the breach between us and the ever accusing law rushes the Savior. He rushes to help you, my dear brother in the ministry, because your soul is just as weak by nature as any of the souls you serve, but he also rushes to help because your soul is just as precious to him as any soul that you serve.

And his plan to comfort (and empower!) us begins by singing us a song - a Servant Song.

The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary.
He wakens me morning by morning,
wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.
The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears,
and I have not been rebellious;
I have not drawn back. (Isaiah 50:4–5)

From a distance of 700 years, the pre-incarnate Christ speaks as if our flesh and blood were already draped around him, as if he were already in the midst of his life and ministry. And he speaks of something his Father would have observed in his life that the Father had not experienced once since the fall in the Garden. Here was the one who spoke with an instructed tongue the very words of the Father because, as he was wakened morning by morning, he listened. Never once did he draw back. Instead with open ears and open heart he lived by the truth that man does not live by bread alone but on every word from his Father’s mouth (Matthew 4:4, Deuteronomy 8:3).

How beautifully we see that lived out seven centuries later. Picture this Servant of the Lord, as the boy Jesus, when he didn’t merely trample the temple courts for the obligatory feast days. Instead his feet eagerly continued to abide in his Father’s house (Luke 2:41ff). There his open ears and heart imbibed the very Word which he, as true God, had inspired in the prophets. Yes, there is mystery here of the relationship of the two natures in Christ that goes beyond our curious probing! But this is no mystery: a true human obedience of delighting in the Word of God was being lived out morning by morning!

And prayer? Here is the man who, after a busy day and night of people standing in line at Peter’s house, got up early, before the crowds had re-gathered, to spend hours in intimate conversation with his Father (Mark 1:35).

Is it any wonder that at the beginning of his ministry and again near its close the Father thunders from heaven, “You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11)?

But what is a wonder, beyond measuring, is that at your baptism and mine the Father proclaimed essentially the same thing as he clothed us with this obedience of which the Servant sang! “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ” (Galatians 3:26-27).

Apply that as the answer when the law’s bony, accusing finger points at the faults and frailties of your devotional life of Word and prayer. Everything the 2nd and 3rd Commandments ask of you has been handed to you as **already accomplished** in Jesus’ life for you. There is nothing you can do — or need to do — to offer a higher standard of love and devotion for Word and prayer than that which you **already possess** in Jesus’ life! God is not looking for you to prove anything to him by your devotional life as you approach him in Word and prayer. You come to him already possessing a perfect Servant’s delight in Word and prayer. What is lacking that you need to add?

And as if that wasn’t enough, Jesus provides even further reason for a conscience to rest at peace. It is found, strangely enough, right after the piercing accusation against a people (then...and now) who have rightly earned the nickname “Sodom...and Gomorrah.”

“Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD.
“Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool.” (Isaiah 1:18)

What had God promised earlier in Isaiah 1 to those who had treated Word and prayer with disdain? “When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen” (Isaiah 1:15). Yet it is just that pain of God-forsakenness that we see our Servant endure instead as he cries out from his cross. He who justly promised in Psalm 1 that those who neglect his Word will be “like the chaff that the wind blows away” (1:4) and that “they will not stand in the judgment” (1:5), is himself blown away by the scorching wind of his own justice as if he could not stand!

And now, again, apply this that you know so well to your devotional life of Word and prayer. Every crimson and scarlet sin by which you and I have ever dishonored God’s gifts of Word and prayer has already been **washed from your record** by Jesus’ death for you. As you rest in the wounds of Jesus, your heavenly Father sees not a single spot remaining of any abuse of his gifts of Word and prayer! That is the unblemished record with which you approach God in Word and prayer each day.

Here is how our Lutheran heritage of proclaiming the truth of universal (for all!) and objective (all done!) justification delivers to us the heart and core of our devotional heritage! Theologically, we **begin** in our devotional life where so many vainly strive to arrive as the end goal. We begin with the assurance of a perfect standing with our God, forgiven and clothed with a perfect record of keeping every commandment. We approach Word and prayer as those already at one with him, not somehow trying to achieve that. What others vainly seek to grasp by their devotion to disciplines and directives for proper prayer and meditation is simply handed to us in Jesus. While we must not grow boastful here, since every false theology simply puts into dogma what occurs naturally also to our hearts, yet the devotional approaches of so much of the rest of the visible church are vain strivings to gain something they do not believe they possess, rather than to treasure and enjoy what is already ours in Jesus.

Consider, for instance, the devotional approach of Rome. Over the course of the centuries those who wanted to speed the process of co-operating in winning eternal life (beyond the pedestrian pace outlined in the seven sacraments with their infused grace) sought through various “isms” to reach some sense of full union with God. Whether it was the deceitfully alluring paths of asceticism, monasticism, or mysticism, many throughout the centuries have sought to gain by strenuous adherence to spiritual disciplines and rules about what not to handle, taste, or touch (Colossians 2:21) what we as Lutherans know is already our possession. Our point of *departure* not our hope for *destination* is that we have been freely given full union and communion with a Triune who is already well pleased with us and who, ever since our baptism, dwells within us as his holy temple in the most intimate union possible. Listen as one author traces the path trudged by so many down through the centuries, and its contrast with the Lutheran approach:

The absence of justification as a theological category separate from sanctification is a dominant factor shaping pre-Reformation spirituality. Luther felt that the spiritual lives of all Catholics, from the monks and nuns to the most retiring layperson, were affected by this justification gap. He also believed that this missing spiritual dimension virtually determined the whole shape of the medieval Church: "Ah, if the article on justification hadn't fallen, the brotherhoods, pilgrimages, masses, invocation of saints, etc., would have found no place in the church. If it falls again (which may God prevent!) these idols will return."

This is an interesting comment on the vital force of theology and spirituality in shaping structures. The core doctrines of spiritual theology determine the shape of spirituality. But spirituality then amplifies the force of these doctrines, and it energizes and projects their shape on the whole theology and Church structure.

How did the absence of justification lead to dysfunction in medieval spirituality? Catholics believed they were justified in the process of being sanctified. Since sanctification is never perfect and always in peril during our lifetime, they were imperfectly assured of their salvation. Serious believers could cure this uneasiness by martyrdom, or by the bloodless martyrdom of ascetic spirituality.

Sanctification, bearing an unnatural weight because it was expected to pacify the believer's conscience, was a subject of extraordinary concern. But the ascetic method of sanctification was by amputation, not by healing. If the believer is having trouble with sex, give up sexual relations. If he or she is having difficulty with covetousness, give up private property. If he or she is tempted by power, give up independence. The monastery and the nunnery are sanctification machines that guarantee the surest victory over the sinful use of money, sex, and power.

Monasteries are an eastern religious instrument, not a Biblical format. And the medieval view of sanctification was subject to other eastern intrusions. The desert fathers are typically Hellenistic, if not Buddhist, in their assumption that spirit and matter - and especially soul and body - are enemies. "The body kills me," says Macarius, "so I will kill it!"

The western mystical tradition, from Augustine through Bernard and the Rhineland mystics, moved beyond this spiritual masochism to see that mortifying sin was the goal of sanctification and that this was not usually helped by punishing the body. But ascetic mysticism characteristically views spiritual growth as the result of hard work. A central image of this

literature is the ladder. One starts at the bottom, and there are thirteen steps that must be climbed, for instance, to move from pride to humility.

Or, at the very least, there are the three steps of the Triple Way: the purging of sin from one's life, then the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and then union with God. There are important lessons for Protestants in this structure, but we must make two observations: (1) that first step (purgation of sin) is a big one; (2) faith in Jesus Christ, and even the mention of the Redeemer, are scarce commodities in this literature. It is overwhelmingly theocentric rather than Christocentric, and it is full of nervous instructions to believers trying to cross the gap between man and God on their own footpaths....

And this is the genius of Reformation spirituality. It assumes that the simplest believer leaps to the top of the spiritual ladder simply by realistic faith in Jesus Christ. Consistent Protestants start every day at the top of the ladder, receiving by faith what only God can give and what cannot be achieved by human efforts: assurance of salvation, and the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit....

Similarly Luther stands the *via triplex* on its head. Union with Christ, received by faith, is the foundation of evangelical spirituality, not the final achievement. The illumination of the Holy Spirit then comes in to break up our darkness and show us our sins. Purification of sin, finally, is a sanctification process in which we are led by the Spirit to recognize, confess, and put to death the particular patterns of sin that are present in our characteristic fallen nature. (Lovelace 2000, 215–217)

But a Lutheran approach to spirituality doesn't just present a sharp contrast to Roman Catholic spirituality. So much of the spirituality in the Evangelical world, especially those influenced by the "Methodism" of John Wesley, ends up leading believers on an accidental trip right back to Vatican City as it tries to lead Christians to the promised land of "genuine" spiritual growth. As John Wesley viewed spiritual growth, especially as he eyed the goal of what he called "entire sanctification" (perfection), he put the focus squarely on the proper intention and accompanying strenuous effort of the believer. Without intending to leave Jesus in the dust in the least, in effect the gospel quickly becomes merely the believer's entrance into the spiritual struggle that then must be fought by our strenuous "resolutions" and "efforts." It is our proper intention that indicates how far we advance. All of which puts the believer right back under the law, focused on human achievement and progress: "Am I *really* strenuous enough in my approach to sanctification? Have I *really* resolved to be obedient enough?" Here's how one author describes Wesley's approach to spirituality:

As Wesley was to note in the opening paragraph of *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, "the giving of all my life to God (supposing it possible to do this and go no farther) would profit me nothing, unless I gave my heart, yea, all my heart, to him. I saw that 'simplicity of intention, and purity of affection,' one design in all we speak or do, and one desire ruling all our tempers, are indeed 'the wings of the soul,' without which she can never ascend to the mount of God."

Wesley's conviction of the need for inward holiness of intent was further confirmed by his reading of Thomas à Kempis' *Christian Pattern* and William Law's *Christian Perfection and Serious Call*....Law regarded the end of salvation as the regeneration of the *imago Dei*, perfection in the very likeness of God, but with a focus on the will:

This doctrine does not suppose that we have no need of divine grace, or that it is in our own power to make ourselves perfect. It only supposes that through the want of a sincere intention of pleasing God in all our actions, we fall into such irregularities of life, as by the ordinary means of grace, we should have power to avoid.

And that we have not that perfection, which our present state of grace makes us capable of, because we do not so much as intend to have it.

A right intention, marking a transformation of the will, would change Christians, and through them, the world:

And when you have this intention to please God in all your actions, as the happiest and best thing in the world, you will find as great an aversion to everything that is vain and impertinent in common life... You will be as fearful of living in any foolish way, as you are now fearful of neglecting the publick [sic] Worship.

Now who that wants this general sincere intention can be reckon'd a Christian? And yet if it was amongst Christians, it would change the whole face of the world; true piety, and exemplary holiness, would be as common and visible, as buying and selling, or any trade in life. (Watson 2000, 173–174)

Substitute the word “purpose” for Law and Wesley’s “right intention” and you will find yourself in the mainstream of many books published today in the Evangelical world that relate to advancing in the spiritual life. No Lutheran will (or should) argue with Wesley (or Law, his mentor) that the desire to do the Lord’s will is critical in the heart of the believer (“I will run in the path of your commands now that you have set my heart free” Psalm 119:32). However, what happens is a subtle substitution of cause and effect. The right “intent” or purpose of the heart is often sought directly as the cause of growth in sanctification. And gaining this right “intent” is seen primarily as a decision of the human will that is rendered by the believer who is helped along towards such right “intentions” by following the appropriate patterns of spiritual practices and disciplines. “The wings of the soul” that will bear me ever higher in sanctified living is not the gospel, but my proper desire and intention.

What is missed in all of this is that such a right “intent” or “purpose” is not the *cause* of spiritual growth, but the *fruit* of regularly being immersed in the gospel. The subtle switch of cause and effect ends up treating the gospel as critical for **entering** the kingdom of God, but essentially ancillary to making **progress within** the kingdom.³ This path simultaneously underestimates the enduring wickedness of the natural heart against which the believer will struggle until death. Simultaneously downplayed is the daily necessity of being renewed in the gospel’s power in order for sanctification to exist at all. The gospel is reduced, in practice, to mere knowledge that the believer already possesses, rather than seeing the gospel as the daily power for sanctified living, the true “wings of the soul.” And since in the Wesleyan tradition the emphasis is made that without this growth toward Christian perfection one can hardly be regarded as a Christian, the believer of tender conscience is easily left to doubt the reality of

³ Consider the lack of gospel found in Rick Warren’s *Purpose Driven Life*. The lack of gospel is not an accidental cosmetic flaw but a crack in the foundation. The gospel isn’t even close to predominating in the midst of all the book’s law based encouragements (many of which are quite accurate!) because the gospel is viewed primarily as information already possessed. The believer just needs to get busy being serious about a focused and obedient life. That’s why the spotlight (and accompanying pressure to perform) falls on man’s activity, not God’s.

their Christianity. Welcome back to Rome! The Roman confusion of sanctification and justification has crept back in with its endless potential for doubt and uncertainty.

Allow a modern day Evangelical, tired of all the subtle pressure toward growth and obedience he has seen within the Evangelical world, point out the better path.

I used to think that growing as a Christian meant I had to somehow go out and obtain the qualities and attitudes I was lacking. To really mature, I needed to find a way to get more joy, more patience, more faithfulness, and so on.

Then I came to the shattering realization that this isn't what the Bible teaches, and it isn't the gospel. What the Bible teaches is that we mature as we come to a greater realization of what we already have in Christ. The gospel, in fact, transforms us precisely because it's not itself a message about our internal transformation but about Christ's external substitution. We desperately need an advocate, mediator, and friend. But what we need most is a substitute - someone who has done for us and secured for us what we could never do and secure for ourselves.

The hard work of Christian growth, therefore, is to think less of ourselves and our performance and more of Jesus and his performance for us. Ironically, when we focus mostly on our need to get better, we actually get worse. We become neurotic and self-absorbed. Preoccupation with our effort instead of with God's effort for us makes us increasingly self-centered and morbidly introspective.

Again, think of it this way: sanctification is the daily hard work of going back to the reality of our justification. It's going back to the certainty of our objectively secured pardon in Christ and hitting the refresh button a thousand times a day. Or, as Martin Luther so aptly put it in his Lectures on Romans, "To progress is always to begin again." Real spiritual progress, in other words, requires a daily going backwards.

In *Because He Loves Me*, Elyse Fitzpatrick writes about how important remembrance is in Christian growth:

One reason we do not grow in ordinary, grateful obedience as we should is that we've got amnesia; we've forgotten that we were cleansed from our sins. In other words, he is saying that on-going failure in our sanctification (the slow process of change into Christlikeness) is the direct result of failing to remember God's love for us in the gospel. If we lack the comfort and assurance that his love and cleansing are meant to supply, our failures will handcuff us to yesterday's sins, and we won't have faith or courage to fight against them, or the love for God that's meant to empower this war. Please don't miss the import of Peter's statement. If we fail to remember our justification, redemption, and reconciliation, we will struggle in our sanctification.

Christian growth, in other words, doesn't happen by first behaving better, but by believing better - believing in bigger, deeper, brighter ways what Christ has already secured for sinners. (Tchividjian 2011, 94-95)

Listen again to Tchividjian:

Whatever deficiency lies at the deepest root of our restlessness - no matter how big or small, whether it's life-gripping or comparatively trivial - the missing component is something very specific that Christ has already secured for restless sinners like you and me.

However, that's not where any of us ever look naturally to fill our need.

Obviously, before we were Christians, it was never our natural bent to seek all our satisfaction in Christ and the gospel; but even after God saves us, that isn't where we naturally turn.

In fact, when it comes to Christian life and experience, many of us have understood the gospel as the thing that gets us in, while the thing that then keeps us in (we assume) is our own effort and performance. We recognize that the gospel ignites the Christian life, but we often fail to see that it's also the fuel to keep us going and growing as Christians.

Unless we come to see and embrace the fact that the gospel never loses its importance in the practical out-working of the Christian life, we'll continue to undercut and cheapen the gospel's impact. (Tchividjian 2011, 37–38)

Our Lutheran Confessions warn regularly about this danger of seeing Jesus and his gospel as only our ticket into the kingdom, rather than our power to live within it.

If we had to believe that after our renewal we must become acceptable not by faith on account of Christ but on account of our keeping of the law, our conscience would never find rest. Instead, it would be driven to despair. For the law always accuses since we never satisfy the law. The entire church confesses this. For Paul says [Rom. 7:19], "For I do not do what I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Likewise [7:25], "With my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin." For who loves or fears God enough? Who endures patiently enough the afflictions imposed by God? Who does not often doubt whether human affairs are ruled by the counsel of God? Who does not often doubt whether one is heard by God? Who is not often angry that the wicked enjoy a better lot than the pious and that the godly are oppressed by the wicked? Who is not often enraged by the judgment of God when he seems to abandon us? How many live up to their calling? How many love their neighbor as themselves? Who is not incited by concupiscence? About these sins the psalm says [Ps. 32:6], "Therefore let all who are the saints offer prayer to you." Here he says that the saints pray for the forgiveness of sins. Those who do not think that the wicked desires of the flesh are sins are more than blind. Paul [Gal. 5:17] says about these things, "For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit" and vice versa. The flesh distrusts God, trusts the things around it, seeks human help in calamities and, contrary to the will of God, flees afflictions that, according to God's command, it ought to bear, and doubts the mercy of God. The Holy Spirit contends with such desires in our hearts in order to restrain and mortify them and in order to implant new spiritual impulses.

Augustine says, "All the commandments of God are fulfilled, when whatever is not done is forgiven." Therefore, he requires faith even when doing good works, that is, that we believe that we are pleasing to God on account of Christ and that the works themselves which please God are not worthy in and of themselves. (Kolb and Wengert 2000, sec. Apology IV, 164a–172a)

While only in Roman Catholicism would such crass work-righteousness be openly expounded, yet it is also true that in much of Evangelicalism the gospel's relegation to a secondary role in spiritual growth yields much the same in unintentional effect. And lest we find in such confusion by others reason to

become arrogant, what Catholicism (openly) and Evangelicalism (more subtly) teach is nothing other than that which occurs naturally to all of us by our proud human reason. We love to play the important parts in our growth in sanctification while relegating God to playing second fiddle on the side.

But such is not the emphasis of the devotional heritage handed down to us! The emphasis of the Lutheran devotional life, like all of Lutheran teaching on sanctification, is *not* about obtaining something we don't have by strenuous effort and obedience. It is rather at its heart delving more deeply into the beating heart of the comforting and empowering love of God. It is grasping more clearly what has already been ours from the first moment the Spirit brought us to faith in Jesus. We are not seeking for how we might get ahold of riches we don't possess, but simply learning day by day to rightly value the vast wealth that is already ours! It is this insight that is the gospel-focused jewel of our Lutheran devotional heritage!

That is why the emphasis of Lutheran devotional life is a daily returning to the place where it all began. The heart and core of Lutheran devotional life is a daily return to the water of our baptism. As Luther said above, we move ahead by beginning again. There at our own personal Jordan we learn to die again every day to the sin that wants to rob us of our trust in Jesus. There we rise again to newness of life armed with the twin gospel blessing of comfort and strength in Christ. After all, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

In ***The Dictionary of Christian Spirituality***, Janet Strohl, summarizes Lutheran spirituality this way:

For Luther the foundation of Christian discipleship was baptism. It serves as the polestar, guiding the believer through life and death. The proclamation of the Word of God combined with the washing in water joins the baptized to the body of Christ, placing them within the believing community. God declares recipients to be God's beloved and gives them the Holy Spirit to confirm their faith, empower their discipleship, sustain them in suffering, and bring them to eternal life.

Baptism breaks the bondage of original sin, which, for Luther, is rooted in humanity's ruptured relationship with God. Without even recognizing it, people are unable to love or trust God. Luther described the sinner as *incurvatus in se*, curved in on oneself. This is the concupiscence or lust that Luther deplored, for it makes one's neighbors and even God subservient to one's desires.

Through baptism God changes the relationship with humanity. The Christian emerges from the waters of baptism *simul iustus et peccator*, simultaneously saint and sinner. It is not the case that when there is more of one there is less of the other. Rather, one is wholly both before God in every moment of one's existence, for God sees the believer in completeness: the enemy of God who must be exposed and condemned, and the bride united with Christ the bridegroom in his righteousness and self-giving. Baptism is an enduring sign of God's Word as law and gospel. It forces one to confess the virulence of one's sin and one's desperate need for mercy (law). It also leaves one no doubt as to the boundless generosity of God, teaching one to speak the

language of repentance the whole of one's life, daily drowning the old Adam and raising the new (gospel). (Scorgie 2011, 591)⁴

All of Lutheran spirituality finds its beating heart in this daily return to where it all began for us. Our Lutheran heritage, learning from Scripture, does not teach us to build our spiritual growth on the strength of our “intentions” or “purposes.” Instead, it urges us to confess daily the deeply inherent weakness of our own “intentions” and “purposes” that will, until heaven, be a confusingly mixed bag of conflicting motivations. We acknowledge that we can never leave behind our sinful nature even for a moment, and that apart from Christ that nature renders even the best of our “righteous acts” to be nothing, if judged by merit, but “filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6).

But lest Lutheran spirituality become a distorted turning back in on ourselves, we must maintain that the chief element of our growth in spirituality is not the daily death to self but the daily rising to life of a new creation of God. As we return to the water of our baptism, there we are reminded that the gospel is far more than some useful information about how we got into the kingdom of God. It is instead the alone comforting and transforming power of the Holy Spirit that daily renews us with the wonder of our gracious God. It is that gospel power that enables us, in our new self the Spirit planted in us, to “will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13).

Never will we fully exhaust the depths of that saving love which goes beyond human measurement (Ephesians 3:17-19). Therefore, the key ingredient in our spiritual life is not what we bring to the table post-conversion, it is and always remains grasping more fully the boundless glory of God’s saving love to us in Jesus. Isn’t that why Paul could think of nothing better to pray for the believers of Ephesus than to ask that “the God our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe” (Ephesians 1:17-19). Paul didn’t pray for such knowledge and enlightenment for them (or us) because they were somehow deficient in their spiritual training. Rather, Paul is simply identifying the constant need of the Christian then and now to recognize ever more fully the wonder of God’s active, saving love that is at work for us in Jesus. The more our lives grasp that, the more the strength of that gospel impacts our lives. Instead of hammering away by demanding the necessary fruit (obedience), Lutheran spirituality emphasizes the hidden root (the heart daily transformed and empowered by the gospel). While we are unafraid to direct the believer in the paths of obedience, our Lutheran devotional heritage knows that it is potentially deadly to coerce or compel such obedience by appeals to sincerity of human intent.

CONCLUSION

It is with that understanding of the pivotal and pinnacle place of the gospel in our spiritual growth that our Lutheran devotional heritage has developed a threefold emphasis: *oratio* (prayer), *meditatio* (meditation on Scripture), and *tentatio* (struggle, testing, *Anfechtung*). These are not three additions to the gospel as the central focus of the Christian life, as if now, suddenly, we have shifted our primary emphasis from divine grace to human obedience. Rather, each of these three is seen through the lens of Christ’s cross and empty tomb as gifts of grace intimately connected to the gospel. Each of these

⁴ It would have been good if Strohl had acknowledged that the true “I” of the Christian is the new self. To put it another way, our dual nature of saint/sinner does not imply a dual status. We stand in grace (Romans 5:2) as those who have in Christ the status of dearly loved children of God. That is our true identity.

three gifts has been given to believers to assist them in a lifelong probing of the limitless depths of the gospel.

It is to a closer examination of each of those three elements of Lutheran spirituality that the three companion essays in this series will now explore one by one.

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DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR USE WITH GROUPS

The 2nd & 3rd Commandments' rightly demand love for Word and prayer, and these demands of the law certainly play a daily role in leading us to repentance and guiding our use of those gifts. Yet, it will always be important to approach our devotional life predominantly from the side of the gospel rather than the law. Discuss what can help us keep just such a gospel focus in our devotional life.

What would you list as your favorite glimpse from Jesus' life and ministry of his substitutionary fulfillment of the 2nd and 3rd Commandment on our behalf?

As we consider the less-than-gospel-centered approaches to devotional life outside of Lutheranism, why is it important to remember that the thinking behind such approaches⁵ is natural to all of us?

Look at the two quotations from Tullian Tchividjian on pages 11-12. How can we better help ourselves and others remember that the gospel is not merely our ticket into the kingdom but also the real key for spiritual growth no matter how long we've lived within God's kingdom?

Consider the summary of the Lutheran devotional life in the quotation from Janet Strohl on pages 13-14. From what she lists - or even from what she didn't mention in her brief summary - what do you believe is the richest insight of our Lutheran devotional heritage?

When it comes to our basic approach to devotional life as Lutherans, was there anything that the essay should have addressed that it didn't?

As this series of essays gets underway, begin to consider now whom you might ask to be your Barnabas among your pastoral brothers who could encourage you in your devotional life.⁶ Since the hardest person for us to speak both law and gospel to is often ourselves, it can be exceedingly helpful for keeping our focus on the gospel, and for being encouraged when we stumble, to have another brother who walks by our side on this path.

⁵ It was not the focus of this essay, but there *is* certainly much that we can learn about devotional life from Christians beyond the scope of Lutheranism. However, it is also critical to be discerning enough to recognize the basic legalism at work in the approaches to devotional life typically found both within Catholicism and Evangelicalism (and elsewhere). For example, a "spiritual" culture's fascination with the ancient "disciplines" of the devotional life encourages us to be very discerning in what we adopt and encourage others to adopt.

⁶ Encourage here is not a code word merely for the law-as-curb function of holding one another accountable. While the mere act of asking someone to encourage us in our devotional life already serves a "law as curb" function in our life (and that is useful to us), yet the most important encouragement any brother can give us is to speak the gospel when we stumble in Word and prayer and to keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus.