

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

“Restrain, O Lord, the human pride That seeks to thrust Your truth aside Or with some man-made thoughts or things Would dim the words Your Spirit sings” (LSB585:5). You will sing this prayer momentarily as we partake of Christ’s Holy Supper. That’s what “human pride” so often tries to do: thrust God’s truth aside and replace it with “man-made thoughts or things.”

Scripture speaks a lot about this pride; it’s a sin. Scripture warns of it: “*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall*” (Prov. 16:18). It ought not be the way of Christians: “*The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil,*” Solomon wrote under inspiration. Therefore, “*Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech [we should] hate*” (Prov. 8:13). St. Paul proscribes it: “*Do not be haughty*” (Rom. 12:16) — a synonym for this human pride. The blessed Virgin Mary sings of God “*[scattering] the proud in the thoughts of their hearts*” and “*[bringing] down the mighty from their thrones*” (Luke 1:51-52).

Pride is a deadly sin, the church has held. It’s often listed as the first of the seven deadly sins. It was the cause of Satan’s downfall; and he used it against our first parents in the garden: “*the serpent said to the woman, “... God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God ... ”*” (Gen. 3:4-5). Well, that sounds great! And so she ate; and the man ate. And sin and death entered into the world.

C. S. Lewis called pride “the complete anti-God state of mind” (From *Mere Christianity*, quoted in Wikipedia article on “The Seven Deadly Sins”). What is this human pride? It’s an excessively high opinion of oneself and one’s abilities and intelligence and righteousness.

Now not all pride is sin. St. Paul talked about his pride in his fellow saints in Corinth (1 Cor. 15:31), at one point saying: “*I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy*” (2 Cor. 7:4). In fact, what parent has not felt pride at the accomplishments of a child? What teacher has not been proud of the success of a student? No sin there. No, the problem is pride turned in on oneself.

Pride is associated with boasting. Again, St. Paul warns us of boasting in ourselves and our works: our salvation is not by our works; there’s nothing for us to boast about (Eph. 2:9). “*[F]ar be it from me to boast ...*” (Gal. 6:14), Paul said. Indeed, if anyone had something to boast about, it would have been St. Paul himself: “*If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more,*” he said. “*[A]s to righteousness under the law, [I am] blameless*” (Phil. 3:4, 6). Yet, Paul says, “*I counted [all that] as loss for the sake of Christ*” (Phil. 3:7). Paul turns our attention back to Christ and being “*found in him, not having a righteousness of [our]*

*own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:8-9). “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (2 Cor. 10:17), Paul taught, that is, “in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14).*

But man, by nature, wants to boast in himself. He wants the credit. He wants to be proud of himself. Now, in everyday kinds of situations, there’s not anything wrong with that. The problem comes when it spills over into things eternal, when we apply it to God, when we boast in ourselves before God, wanting to take credit for our own salvation, taking pride in our own righteousness.

That was the way of the Pharisees and scribes. They enveloped God’s law with their own “man-made thoughts and things” — their traditions that became as laws, and then they thought that by keeping them, they were doing something meritorious. They thought they had something to boast about ... like Jesus illustrated in His parable of the Pharisee and tax collector in Luke’s gospel. That Pharisee proudly prayed: “*God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get*” (Luke 18:11-12).

Likewise here in Mark, the Pharisees thought themselves more righteous than the disciples because of their ceremonial washing before a meal.

But Jesus calls them out on it. Their hearts were not directed toward God. They weren’t faithful. They were hypocrites ... they were putting on a show ... they were merely going through the motions of being Godly, but were not in fact godly. They elevated their man-made traditions into commandments, teaching the people that, by not doing them, they were sinning.

The Pharisees were wrong. In fact, they themselves were “*rejecting the commandment of God*” — for example, the Fourth Commandment. Jesus called them out on their overturning of their obligation to “honor their father and mother” by keeping the Pharisees’ tradition. “I’m giving this Corban offering to God, so, Mom and Dad, I don’t owe you anything!” How wicked is that?

But ultimately the issue is not about the law, and it’s not about the tradition. It’s about the heart. “*This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.*” It’s not about a hypocritical “going through the motions”; it’s about believing with our whole heart: “*if [we] confess with [our] mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in [our] heart that God raised him from the dead, [we] will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved*” (Rom. 10:9-10).

Of course, we all have our own traditions ... personal traditions, family traditions, national traditions. Being a tradition doesn't make it bad. Traditions can often be good, your family's Christmas traditions or our nation's Thanksgiving traditions, for example. But they can be bad ... what seems to have been handed down in our culture about marriage, for example, with divorce, cohabiting, and having children out of wedlock all going up dramatically in the last decades. These have been destructive of families. Not surprisingly, God's way, as Paul describes it in our Epistle, is best.

We have traditions in church too, like worship traditions. We may even take some pride in them. I know that we — myself, Mike, the elders, the altar guild, Kevin and his cleaning crews — all work hard to ensure we have a Divine Service that is done well, with good order, conducted in a space that is beautiful and conducive to hearing the word of God, led by a magnificent instrument that aids in our praises to God. We might even say that these are worthy of boasting — and it's okay to boast of them, even for us humble Lutherans, knowing, of course, that our traditions and our holy place and its accoutrements themselves are of no merit for our salvation. They are not the source of grace. They are not necessary for our salvation. They do not make atonement with God or satisfaction for sin. With Luther, we confess that it is “unchristian” to declare that “human traditions serve for the forgiveness of sins or merit salvation” (Smalcald Articles, Third Part, Article XV:1). We condemn this teaching.

But we have them because we “*love the habitation of [the Lord's] house and the place where [His] glory dwells*”; and we use them in Christian freedom because they are beautiful, because they are fitting in the church, because they give glory and honor to our God and Savior Jesus Christ, and because they help us focus on Him and receive the gifts through which He does “*wonderful things with [us, His] people,*” so that we may hear of the righteousness that comes through faith in Him and so that this faith wrought in us by the Holy Spirit may be strengthened. Ultimately, our worship is all about Jesus who graces us with His presence as we gather two or three in His name (Matt. 18:20). The traditions themselves are not the “*wonder upon wonder*” God gives here. They don't effect our forgiveness and life, but they accompany the true wonders — God's Word and Sacraments through which the Holy Spirit does His wonderful work of creating and preserving faith by which we receive our forgiveness and life.

To be sure, some people continue to accuse the Lutheran Church of retaining papal abuses because they see us use these free things. They say our church has not been “successful in cleansing itself” from the vestiges of Rome. They point to vestments, church ornamentation, paintings and stained glass windows, the altar, crucifixes, candles, confession, the sign of the cross, and more. It's true we retain

these things, showing that our quibble with Rome is not about these things — it's about the pure Gospel. On the other hand, the Protestants eschew most of these things. We may not think it wise or helpful, but they're free to do it. And again, our quibble with them is the pure Gospel!

The Gospel is distinct from traditions and from the Law. The Gospel is the preaching of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. The Gospel is the preaching of Jesus Christ risen from the dead. The Gospel is the preaching of forgiveness in His name by water and Word and supper. Our life is found in Christ and Christ alone. He is our righteousness; He is our hope. We look to Him alone for our salvation. Our pride is in Him, along with our boasting. In the words of St. Paul: we cling to *“Christ Jesus [alone], who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’”* (1 Cor. 1:30-31).

Therefore, we pray: Lord help us to teach Your word in its truth and purity; “help us ever to retain The Catechism’s doctrine plain As Luther taught the Word of truth In simple style to tender youth.”

“Help us Your holy Law to learn, To mourn our sin and from it turn In faith to You and to Your Son And Holy Spirit, Three in One.” O Lord, help us to lead holy lives according to Your word.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.