

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

It's not a pretty picture Jesus paints of us at the end of our Gospel lesson. Who are we by nature? We are corrupt to the heart, and from that rotten heart come all sorts of wickedness: *“evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.”* We want to blame it all on the devil, and, to be sure, he and his evil horde are our enemy. As St. Paul said, we *“wrestle ... against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”* And these *“spiritual forces of evil”* are powerful.

But the devil is not our only enemy. Twice in his explanations of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, Luther names our three main enemies: “the devil, the world, and our sinful nature.” Do you remember your catechism? “How is God's will done?” “God's will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come” (3rd Petition); and “God tempts no one. We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice” (6th Petition).

In our Gospel, Jesus is talking about that third named enemy ... “our sinful nature,” the sin that we inherit from Adam. The Augsburg Confession (AC) says it this way: “Our churches teach that since the fall of Adam [Romans 5:12], all who are naturally born are born with sin [Psalm 51:5] ...” Think Romans 5: *“sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned”*; think Psalm 51: *“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”* It means that we are born “without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with the inclination to sin, called concupiscence” (AC II:1).

That's what we're up against in our Christian life. Not just Satan; not just the world; but our own sinful nature, corrupt to the heart. Be gone with the idea that you can by your own thoughts, words, and deeds do anything to earn heaven. As the Augsburg Confession continues: “Concupiscence is a disease and original vice that is truly sin. It damns and brings eternal death on those who are not born anew through Baptism and the Holy Spirit [John 3:5]” (AC II:2).

Now remember, Jesus had just scolded the Pharisees for their delusion that keeping their traditions was meritorious. They were *“rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish [their] tradition!”* They were *“making void the word of God by [their] tradition ...”* (Mark 7:9, 13). And Moses was abundantly clear about this word of God: *“You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it,”* but listen to them, keep them, do them, teach them.

How amazing, then, that Jesus upends this teaching with the people. Here He tells the crowd and especially His disciples that keeping the Old Testament dietary laws doesn't do anything for man. That is, neither keeping these laws keeps one clean nor does breaking them make one unclean, for what we eat doesn't enter the heart but the stomach and gets expelled.

By saying this, Jesus turns our attention back to Him, for who could abrogate the Old Testament laws? That's what Jesus does, as Mark testifies: "*Thus he declared all foods clean.*" Who can make null and void God's law but God Himself? Jesus is making a Divine claim here. He's telling the disciples: "Don't look to the Law for your salvation. Look to me, the Son, sent by the Father into mortal flesh; look to my fulfillment of the Law for you. I applied the Law to myself, even though I gave it to you. I condescended to be born under the Law to redeem you who were under the Law (Gal. 4:4-5).

Again, this is what St. Paul proclaimed: "*God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh [that is, in the flesh of Jesus, condemned for us], in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit*" (Rom 8:4-5).

That's amazing, too. Because of Christ, "*the righteous requirement of the law*" is fulfilled in us as we walk according to the Spirit, that is, by faith in Christ. That begins with the bath that God Himself does, that washes away our iniquity and cleanses us from our sin. "*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you*" (Ezek. 36:25) — no longer unclean but clean. With this rebirth by water and the Spirit (John 3:5), we are called out of this world of corruption and into the kingdom of God. By this washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit whom God poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior (Tit. 3:5), we are made new creations, given a new heart to replace the corrupt heart of stone and new spirit that is God's own Spirit (Ezek. 36:26-27). We believe in Jesus, and we are reckoned righteous "law keepers" (Rom. 4:22-25).

True, in this life we are still burdened with our flesh, which is why we continue to cry out, as we will again today: "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me*" (Ps. 51:10), assured that God, who gives us water and word and supper, hears our prayers and answers them. And then with this new heart and new spirit, as Christians unburdened by the threats of the Law (Rom. 8:2), we are free to live as the new creations the second Adam has made us, free to live as our first parents were meant to live before the fall, before their sin corrupted everything.

We won't get it all right. To repeat, we're still encumbered by the sinful flesh that wars against the new man in us. And so we also live by repentance and forgiveness, ever striving to live a more Christ-like life, never being yoked again to the slavery of the Law (Gal. 5:1), but using the Law to convict us of our sin (Rom. 7:7), and to guide us into Christ-like godliness (Ps. 119:105) ... and never losing hope, for our hope is in Christ. Our life is in Him.

God grant that we may ever live this life — it's the Christian life, it's the life of the baptized, as Luther explains it: "What does such baptizing with water indicate?" "It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

"Where is this written?" "St. Paul writes in Romans chapter six: 'We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.' (Rom. 6:4)."

God grant this life to us ...

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