

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Here in the heart of the Gospel according to St. Luke, we experience Jesus the teacher. In today's Gospel lesson, He teaches the disciples that "*It's impossible for stumbling blocks not to come,*" or as the ESV translates it without the double negative: "*Temptations to sin are sure to come.*" "*But woe to the one by whom they come.*"

At LSUS this past week, our students were reminded that God is not the source of temptation to sin. "God tempts no one," Luther teaches in the 6th petition of the Lord's Prayer: "And lead us not into temptation." Rather, when we pray that petition, we're asking for God's protection, that He "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" (Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, 6th Petition).

But Luther acknowledges that "we are attacked by these things." "*Temptations to sin are sure to come.*"

Several weeks ago, we talked about the hard life of discipleship; back then it was about counting the cost in terms of family relationships as one confesses Christ, in terms of trials and tribulations and financial costs. Today, Jesus takes up this topic of discipleship again, and we're reminded, it's still hard for the baptized who seek to follow Jesus. We shall be tempted sorely and we are called to do hard things, pastors and laity. We're called to rebuke sin, to repent of sin, and to forgive.

It's not clear to me which is the hardest. Is it to rebuke sin? Of a fellow Christian? Surely, most people would rather not go there. It's one thing to rebuke and correct your child, but a brother in Christ caught up in a sin? Will he reject our rebuke? Will he turn the rebuke back on us for something we have done? These are distinct possibilities, and faced with such, most people would rather remain silent than confront a brother for his sin and rebuke him.

Yet, the purpose of the rebuke for the Christian is restoration as St. Paul teaches even as he exhorts the very same thing. "*Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him.*" For Christians, restoration means repentance and forgiveness, as Jesus taught us to preach — "*repentance for the forgiveness of sins*" (Luke 24:47). Paul does add some additional counsel: do it "*in a spirit of gentleness,*" not with a spirit of superiority as if you were such a good Christian as to never do such a thing. In fact, Paul warns: "*Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted*" (Gal. 6:1).

But perhaps the hardest is repenting after a rebuke. Let's admit it ... we don't like to admit we're wrong — no, not I. As Lutherans we're rightly taught about inherited sin — the old Adam in us that is sin and is the source of our sin. It seems to me that we don't mind so much saying that we're sinners, or even that we have

sinned in some generic way. But we recoil when someone suggests that we've actually sinned. Too often, we plant our feet and proudly deny the sin, or we stubbornly remain silent rather than humbling ourselves and admitting when we're wrong and pleading for forgiveness.

And "I didn't mean to ..." is no excuse. I would hope that as Christians we never willfully sin. But we can hurt someone without meaning to do it, and that's still a sin to be confessed, as Luther teaches us to examine ourselves: "Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds?" (Small Catechism, Office of the Keys, Which [sins] are these?)

So repenting is hard; our flesh resists it; but let us ever be quick to repent that we may hear absolution.

But that leads us to forgiving (that is, absolution). Is it the hardest? Again, the flesh is in play here, for if someone has sinned against us, we often want to exact some sort of vengeance, some sort of punishment. It makes us feel better, maybe even superior. And we plot ways to use that sin against that wretched sinner.

Surely, that ought not be! Indeed, why would anyone admit to a sin against you if you were going to use it as a cudgel against them? Better to keep on denying it. And with respect to God, why would anyone confess his sins were it not for God's forgiveness? We Lutherans teach that we repent so that we might be forgiven. This is how we say it in the Augsburg Confession (Tappert, German version, XXV Confession: 13): "the preachers on our side diligently teach that confession is to be retained for the sake of absolution (which is its chief and most important part), for the consolation of terrified consciences, and also for other reasons."

Therefore, Jesus says to us Christians, "*Forgive him*" ... the brother who repents, and not just once, but multiple times ... seven times Jesus says here, but on another occasion recorded in Matthew, Jesus answers Peter, saying, "*I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times*" (Matt. 18:22). That's the Christian way — not holding on to offenses, but forgiving as we have been forgiven in Christ. Echoing Jesus, that's what Paul taught, too: "*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you*" (Eph. 4:32). Forgiveness is the lifeblood of the Church! Sinners cannot live in peace and harmony without it.

But, even Christians have to deal with our flesh that rebels against holy living. And this life of discipleship is hard. Jesus' disciples recognized it — the Twelve recognized it and prayed, "*Increase our faith!*" Do we need it any less than they? No, we need to pray that same prayer, so that our lives may show forth this fruit of faith in love and forgiveness.

Finally, our life of discipleship is hard because when we've done everything that we are supposed to do, none of it is profitable for our salvation, and our pride

hates to admit it. Jesus says, having “*done all that you were commanded*,” you are still an unworthy servant and have only done your duty. There is no reward in that.

To use a modern day example, no one in the military gets a medal for merely doing his duty. To be honored with a medal, one must perform “exceptionally meritorious service” or “display ‘extraordinary heroism’” or “distinguish themselves through conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life and above and beyond the call of duty” (medalsoftamerica.com). Relative to God’s perfect standard, that’s impossible for man.

But Jesus taught: “*What is impossible with man is possible with God*” (Luke 18:27). That’s why God sent Jesus, who distinguished Himself with conspicuous gallantry, humbling Himself by taking on our mortal flesh and taking to Himself our sin. He displayed incredible intrepidity as He was arrested, knowing that He was about to be scourged and hung from a cross unto death. Jesus went above and beyond the call of duty with His sacrifice that takes away the sins of the world and with His supernatural rising from the dead on the third day. Our salvation is of Jesus Christ, our Lord, not of anything done by us in righteousness. We are saved by His grace and mercy, and He gives us the fruits of His cross and resurrection by baptism, and absolution, and Lord’s Supper.

And so, we come to His table today, acknowledging our sin, having ourselves been rebuked of it here. We come repenting of our sin and having heard the absolution. We come desiring even more forgiveness given in His body broken and His blood shed.

And we will depart from Jesus’ table with joy and with thanks for this grace, praying: “Lord, increase our faith and help us to do our duty.” Yes, Lord, having been refreshed by “this salutary gift,” grant us this prayer: “that of Your mercy You would strengthen us through the same in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another” — for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

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