

Lutheran Piety In The Life Of A Called Worker

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One of the greatest dangers to, confessional Lutheranism historically has been the spirit of Pietism. Pietism in Germany was, a reaction to what was perceived as a dead orthodoxy and a lack of spiritual life in the Lutheran Church of the 17th and 18th centuries. The pietists identified some real problems in the church of their day, but they came up with faulty answers and inappropriate solutions. Pietism shifted the focus in the life of the church" from justification (God's declaring sinners not guilty because of Christ's work of redemption) to sanctification (the process by which the Holy Spirit leads a believer to live a life filled with good works). Although both teachings are important, they must' be kept in the proper relationship to each other or serious problems result. By giving sanctification priority over justification Pietism changed Christianity' from a theocentric (God-centered) orientation to an anthropocentric (roan-centered) orientation. In the process subjective feelings became more important than the objective truths of God's Word, the proper distinction between law and gospel was lost, the means of grace were disparaged, and true sanctification and piety were hindered.

Confessional Lutherans in America live in a society prone to the temptations of Pietism. If there is a conservative religious spirit in this country, it is the spirit of American Evangelicalism. Evangelical churches are growing. Christian radio stations with Christian talk shows and Christian music are multiplying. Devotional literature and books on improving every aspect of the Christian's life, penned by Evangelical authors, fill the shelves of religious bookstores. The language of Evangelicalism finds its way into our vocabulary. Although there are things that we can admire in American Evangelicalism, we would be remiss if we, did not point out that the spirit of Pietism pervades the movement.

Recognizing the problems in Pietism, however, does not mean that we should not be interested in true piety. Pietism's overemphasis on sanctification should not lead us ignore this important teaching of Scripture. The question we will want to ask is this: "How can we promote personal piety without falling into pietism?"

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What is piety? Piety is the condition and attitude of reverence and devotion to God that comes with faith in Christ. Since piety is intimately connected to faith, piety is also intimately connected to the means of grace.

I. True piety is a gift of God which we receive through the means of grace.

There is only one way to be saved – through faith in Jesus (John 3:16-18). There is only one way for anyone to come to faith – through the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacraments. As St. Paul writes,

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" ...Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Romans 10:13-15,17).

Again the Scriptures declare, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith" (Romans 1:16-17).

The Bible calls baptism "the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). Because the Holy Spirit works through baptism to create faith-faith which receives the gift of salvation, St.

Peter can say, "Baptism...now saves you also - not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God" (1 Peter 3:21). In the Lord's Supper our Savior gives us his very body and blood by which we were redeemed to assure each of us personally of forgiveness of sins and salvation, "This is my body given for you...This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:19-20). The new covenant is the forgiveness of sins.

Through Word and sacrament the Holy Spirit not only creates faith, he also preserves and strengthens faith. The words of our Savior are spirit and life (John 6:63). Through his Word we are to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). Daily reading of the Holy Scriptures and family devotions are important. There is much good Lutheran devotional material available. But our devotional life can be more than simply reading from a devotional book. Our devotional life can also include reading and reviewing Bible stories with our children before they go to bed or singing some of the great hymns of the church. We can review the catechism with our children while we refresh ourselves with those precious truths written in language so simple a child can understand. Luther himself returned to the catechism every day. He wrote,

I, too, am a doctor and a preacher...Yet I continue to do as a child does that is being taught the Catechism. Mornings, and when I otherwise have time, I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the Catechism daily, yet I cannot master it as I like, but must remain a child and student of the Catechism.¹

We can treasure regularly hearing the words of absolution or forgiveness in Christ whether in public worship or privately from another Christian. We can announce God's forgiveness to our children when they recognize that they have done wrong or when their conscience is bothering them.

We will want to treasure the sacraments. Regularly feasting on our Savior's body and blood in his Holy Supper will cause us to grow in grace. We can also return to our baptism every day. When we remember our baptism we are reminded that our gracious Father in heaven has adopted us into his family. He has forgiven all of our sins in Jesus. He has created new life in us. We have died and risen with Christ. Salvation is ours. Beginning each day by returning to our baptismal grace will help us see our life from a proper perspective.

As we grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Savior Jesus Christ, we will grow in appreciation for all that our Savior has done for us. We will grow in true piety – reverence and devotion to God that comes with faith in Christ.

As good Americans we would probably like a sure-fire plan for measurable growth. If only we could find an easy three-step program or plan that would tell us that if we spent fifteen minutes every day reading the Bible and went to communion every time it is offered, we would be able to measure our growth in faith and piety. The Holy Spirit, however, does not work like that. Jesus tells us, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). The Augsburg Confession puts it this way, "For through the Word and sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith *where and when it pleases God* in those who hear the gospel."² Growth in faith, piety, and sanctification is difficult to measure. The Holy Spirit often works these things imperceptibly.

Even though there is no sure-fire method for measuring growth in faith and piety, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit will produce such growth through the means of grace. As God promised Isaiah,

As the rain and 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 55:10-11).

¹ Large Catechism, Preface of 1530, par. 7-8.

² Augsburg Confession, Article V, par. 2.

When the prophet Elijah focused on his problems rather than on God's power and promises, he was near despair. Judging by outward appearance he declared that he was the only one left in Israel who had not forsaken God to serve Baal and now they were trying to kill him too. God had to remind him, "Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him" (1 Kings 19:18). The Lord demonstrated to Elijah that the gentle whisper of the gospel always produces the results God wants, even when it is not apparent to us.

Luther expressed his confidence in that promise when he wrote, "And even if no other sign than this alone, it would still suffice to prove that a Christian, holy people must exist there, for God's Word cannot be without God's people and God's people cannot be without God's Word."³

True piety looks to the promises of God. Christians walk by faith, not by sight. God promises to work through the means of grace to accomplish what he pleases. He keeps those promises whether or not we can always see the evidence in our own lives and in the lives of those we serve.

II. True piety comes through the proper distinction between law and gospel.

Some have noted that Luther's real contribution in the Reformation was bringing to light the proper distinction between law and gospel. Both teachings are God's truth. Both are to be faithfully proclaimed. But if we don't understand the difference and distinction between the two, serious problems will result. We will burden consciences and lose the joy of salvation or we will ignore the sin in our lives and stifle or destroy true Christian piety.

The primary purpose of the law is to show us our sin, to make us conscious of our failings, to hold us accountable to God and to reveal the punishment that we deserve. The law always accuses. It always condemns because it demands perfect obedience which no sinner can offer. "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin" (Romans 3:19-20).

Our Savior and his prophets and apostles did not hesitate to proclaim the law in all its severity. They didn't pull any punches. They told it like it is. They applied the law to the lives of their hearers according to their hearers' spiritual condition and situation.

"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me." But you ask, "How do we rob you?" "In tithes and offerings" (Malachi 3:8-9).

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" (Luke 3:7)

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to the judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again anyone who says to his brother, "Raca," is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, "You fool," will be in danger of the fire of hell... You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery." But I tell you that whoever looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28).

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. When the people heard this they were cut to the heart (Acts 2:36-37a).

Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him (1 John 3:15).

Jesus and his apostles and prophets preached the law in such a way that the people who listened to them

³ *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vol. 41, p. 150.

were convicted of their sins and recognized that they were deserving of eternal punishment. Jesus aimed at the heart, not just at gross outward sins. His prophets and apostles held people accountable for what they had done and for the thoughts and attitudes of their hearts. God's law makes no concessions and neither can we if we are to use the law correctly in our own lives and in the ministry. As C. F. W. Walther reminds us,

When preaching the Law you must bear in mind that the law makes no concessions. That is utterly beside the character of the Law; it only makes demands. The Law says, "You must do this; if you fail to do it, you have no recourse to the patience, loving-kindness and longsuffering of God; you will have to go to perdition for your wrong-doing."⁴

The law has no power to make people better. That is not its purpose. In fact, the law will incite rebellion and even increase sin. Paul writes, "What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.' But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead" (Romans 7:7-8).

The gospel shows us our Savior. It contains no threats, but only unconditional promises. "The blood of Jesus Christ, his Son purifies us from every sin... He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 1:7, 2:2). "He forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases; he redeems my life from the pit and crowns me with love and compassion... He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities... as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:3-4, 10, 12).

Any child in confirmation class can give us the basic distinction between the law and the gospel. The law shows us our sin and the gospel shows us our Savior. The difficulty is not in the definition. The difficulty lies in knowing when to apply each.

Because you and I are sinful human beings, we fall short of the requirements of God's law every day. Our sinful nature is also proud. By nature we try to minimize or ignore our sins. By nature we think that we do not deserve God's eternal punishment. By nature we think that God really owes us salvation because, after all, we really aren't that bad.

That is why we need to hear God's law. God's law will reveal and condemn our laziness, our selfishness, our thoughtlessness, our robbing of God with our materialism and failing to bring him our offerings of thanks in keeping with the blessings he has given us. If we think that half-hearted efforts in the ministry are all right, we need the law to crush us. We dare not minimize the law or pull our punches when we proclaim it or when we apply it to ourselves. We cannot act as if sin were inconsequential or allow ourselves to make excuses. Sin always has consequences and sin can never be excused. God's law has to make us conscious of our sin, or we will not appreciate the comfort of full and free forgiveness through the redemptive work of Jesus.

But when the law has done its work and our conscience is troubling us, the law has nothing more to say to us. When we are troubled by our sins and burdened by our guilt we are to listen only to the gospel. Our Savior invites us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28,29). We find rest for our souls, peace for our troubled consciences in God's full and free forgiveness. Our God declares, "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more" (Isaiah 43:25). "This then is...how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts" (1 John 3:19-20). And again, "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us" (Romans 8:33,34).

Through the gospel the Holy Spirit comforts us and gives us a new heart, a heart that is devoted to the Savior who "loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:2).

⁴ C.F.W. Walther. *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928) p. 86.

Paul speaks of the transforming power of the gospel. "But because of his great mercy, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4-5).

Many who go by the name of Christian really do not understand the proper distinction between the law and the gospel in the life of the Christian. When I was a prep dean, people from time to time would suggest to me that if only I had the right rules and enforced them severely enough, I could eliminate certain kinds of misbehavior. The implication was that by so doing I then could make these young people more Christian. Now the law certainly has a proper role as a curb for sin. But the law has no power to make people better. The law can curb certain outward manifestations of sin, but it cannot change the heart. Rules have a place – they provide order. But they cannot produce true piety or good works. Vows, contracts, and covenants may have a place. But those who rely on them to promote correct behavior are relying on the law rather than the gospel to produce good works.

John Calvin believed that the primary purpose of the law was to drive people on to good works. His approach differed radically from Luther's.

Speaking of the significance of the law for the regenerate, Calvin calls "the third use of the law the 'principal one' – and which is more nearly connected with the proper end of it." He compares the relation of the believer to the law to that of a "servant" to his "master." "By frequent meditation on the law the servant will be excited to obedience...to the flesh the law serves as a whip, urging it, like a dull and tardy animal, forward to its work; and even to the spiritual man, who is not yet delivered from the burden of the flesh, it will be a perpetual spur, that will not permit him to loiter" (II. 7, 12). Commandment, law, duty, servant, obedience – these frequently recurring terms are expressive of the rigorous legalism which characterizes Calvin's conception of Christianity. Luther teaches that the regenerate is ever "ready and cheerful, without coercion, to do good to every one, and to suffer everything for love and praise to God."⁵

I once listened to a presentation by a man who had become a confessional Lutheran after years as an active American Evangelical. He complimented the Evangelicals on their mission-mindedness and their efforts to evangelize the lost. He pointed out that in their evangelism visits they were often very good at proclaiming the law and the gospel. He noted, however, that once a person becomes an Evangelical, he will hear precious little of the gospel. Rather he will hear a lot about rules and principles for Christian living. Most Evangelicals don't understand the importance of the law and the gospel in the life of the Christian. Part of their problem is that they don't understand the means of grace and the work of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps part of their problem is also a remnant of the Calvinistic teaching of "once saved, always saved." Calvinists teach that once a person becomes a Christian or has a born-again experience, he can never fall from faith. If that is the case, then there really is little reason to proclaim the gospel to him any longer. All a Christian needs to do is to learn proper principles or rules for Christian living and make a conscious decision to follow them. If a Christian only makes a conscious decision to surrender his life to Christ, his life will turn around. Such thinking involves a confusion of law and gospel. Evangelicals seem to think that the Christian life finds its power in a person's decision to be obedient rather than in God's grace and forgiveness.

Lutherans understand the importance of the continuing proclamation of the law and the gospel in the life of a Christian because we know from Scripture that Christians can fall from faith. The devil wants nothing more than to lead us into sin and then to make us despair of God's love and forgiveness. Only a regular repetition of the gospel can bring us comfort. The Christian is also involved in a daily struggle with his own sinful nature. The gospel is essential because, as the gospel comforts us, it gives us the power to overcome temptations and live a Christian life. That is important for us to remember when we discipline children and those entrusted to our care. A Christian's life is a life of daily contrition and repentance. Discipline involves the proper application of both law and gospel. If we do not include the announcement of God's forgiveness in our discipline, we will be sending the wrong message. If we are legalistic in dealing with our children, we will be undermining the very Christian life we are trying to encourage. Failing to hear the gospel will also hinder us when we become

⁵ E.H. Klotsche, *The History of Christian Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 238.

consumed with the faults and failings in our personal lives or in the ministry.

A person who truly understands God's law will say with St. Paul, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15). Paul wrote these words toward the end of his life. Please note that he did not say, "I used to be the worst of sinners." He used the present tense – I am the worst of sinners. Since the law always accuses and shows my fault even in the best things that I do, it holds me accountable to God. It does not show me how good I am. It shows me my failings before a perfect and righteous God. It does not let me say, "Oh, sure I'm a sinner, but there are a lot of people who are worse than I am." It only lets me see my sin and the judgment that I deserve. That is why I need to hear the gospel of God's forgiveness every day. The gospel points me to the cross where all of my sins were taken away. Jesus died for all, even for a sinner like me.

Neglecting the law will result in false confidence, self-conceit, and spiritual laziness. Neglecting the gospel will result in complaining, despair, and looking for power in places where God has not promised it. Called workers are prone to both extremes. Proper use of the law and gospel will keep our spiritual lives in balance because such use will lead us to daily contrition and repentance.

III. True piety involves daily repentance.

In the first of his Ninety-five Theses Luther declared, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."⁶

The word repentance is used in both a broad and a narrow sense in Scripture. Repentance in the narrow sense means contrition or sincere sorrow for sin. John the Baptist uses the term in this way when he says, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15) If a person is sincerely sorry for his sin he has changed his mind about his sin. Shame or fear of punishment has led him to take a different attitude toward sin. This contrition or sincere sorrow for sin, however, is not repentance in the broad or proper sense of the term.

Repentance in the broad sense of the term involves both contrition and faith. It includes sincere sorrow for sin and trust in Jesus for forgiveness. Our Savior uses repentance in this way when he says, "But unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:5). "I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:7). The Augsburg Confession explains,

Properly speaking, repentance consists of these two parts: one is contrition, that is terror smiting the conscience with a knowledge of sin, and the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, believes that sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, comforts the conscience, and delivers it from terror of conscience.⁷

Repentance in this broad sense means changing one's mind about salvation. By nature every human being thinks he can get to heaven by being good. When such a person comes to believe that he can only gain hell by himself and that his salvation has been accomplished entirely by what Jesus has done for him, he has had a change of mind. He has undergone a change of heart. He has repented. Repentance is the characteristic state of the Christian life because impenitence is synonymous with unbelief.

Daily repentance means confessing our sins in general, and especially those we know and feel in our hearts. It means turning every day to our Savior and basking in the forgiveness he won for us by his work of redemption. Daily repentance is important because it puts down our old Adam and builds up our new man.

Our old Adam or sinful nature cannot be reformed or improved. It will be with us until the day we die. Only in heaven will we be free from it. Since the sinful nature cannot be reformed, it is to be drowned by daily contrition and repentance so that the new man in us can shine forth. Luther puts it this way,

⁶ *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vol. 31, p. 25.

⁷ Augsburg Confession, Article XII, par. 3-5.

Baptism means that the old Adam in us is to be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also means that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Where is this written?

Saint Paul says in Romans, chapter 6, "We were...buried with [Christ] 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."⁸

True piety is characterized by daily repentance. It is also promoted by daily repentance. That daily exercise reminds us how far short of God's standards we have fallen and places our focus directly on what our Savior has accomplished for us. He has saved us from our sins and opened heaven's doors.

IV. True piety centers in the work of Jesus and the promises of God, not in subjective feelings or outward success.

The Christian life revolves around what Jesus has done and accomplished. True piety involves concentrating on the perfect life and the innocent suffering and death of our Savior. When we look at ourselves, we will see imperfection and failure. When we look at our Savior, we see perfection and victory. When we take our eyes off Jesus we are like Peter who saw the waves, became fearful, and began to sink (Matthew 14:22-33).

My own feelings and experience can be quite deceptive. At times I am emotionally high; at other times I am emotionally low. My emotions, however, do not affect my salvation because my salvation was accomplished by the Son of God. That makes my salvation certain and sure. At times I feel loved by God and feel fully forgiven. But my feelings do not give me the certainty of forgiveness. I receive that certainty from the objective promises of God based on the life, death, and resurrection of my Savior. I am sometimes moved to tears when the law reveals my sin and guilt. At other times I am moved to tears by the gospel which assures me that in Christ I have full forgiveness and eternal life. Yet my tears do not make the law and gospel certain. They have an objective certainty all their own. Sometimes I seem to be embarrassed by certain teachings of the Scripture. But my embarrassment is the result of my sinful nature rather than any defect in God's Word.

True piety centers in Christ, not in my own feelings. My feelings cannot bring me any certainty. Only the Word of Christ can give me confidence because that Word centers in Christ and his accomplishments. Luther puts it this way,

If you are not ready to believe that the Word is worth more than all you see or feel, then reason has blinded faith. So the resurrection of the dead is something that must be believed. I do not feel the resurrection of Christ, but the Word confirms it. I feel sin but the Word says that it is forgiven to those who believe. I see Christians die like other men, but the Word tells me that they shall rise again. So we must not be guided by our feelings but by the Word.⁹

Neither does true piety consist in outward success. We are all good Americans. Americans expect results and success. We admire the self-made man and judge him by what he has accomplished. But outward success brings no certainty of salvation or God's love for us. Unbelievers can be quite successful and their lives rather trouble free. Christians, on the other hand, can suffer loss and have lives filled with problems.

The example of John the Baptist is informative. John was truly a remarkable man. He was the great forerunner of our Savior. Before John appeared there had been a four hundred year period of prophetic silence for God's people. When he came preaching and baptizing, people recognized him as a prophet of God. He drew large crowds even in the remotest of locations – the wilderness. But then the bottom dropped out for John. He

⁸ Small Catechism, Baptism, Fourth Part.

⁹ Luther, Sermon on 1 Corinthians 15:1ff, March 31, 1529; quoted in Harold Senkbeil, *Sanctification: Christ in Action* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1989) p. 116-117.

was arrested and thrown into prison. His circumstances caused doubts to arise in his heart. He sent his disciples to Jesus to ask him whether he was the one who was to come or were they to look for another. Jesus' reply was instructive. "Go back and report to John what you see and hear. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (Matthew 11:4-6). True piety centers in our Savior and in what he has said and done. Outward circumstances can be deceiving.

The more we look at Jesus, the more true piety will grow.

V. In true piety sanctification flows naturally from justification by faith.

To justify means to declare not guilty. Justification and the forgiveness of sins are synonymous expressions. Paul writes, "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works; 'Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him'" (Romans 4:5-8).

My life of sanctification, bringing forth good works, flows from God's forgiveness. St. John declares, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). When Zacchaeus recognized his Savior's mercy and forgiveness, his heart overflowed with expressions of thanksgiving. He promised to repay anyone he had cheated four times over the amount he had taken and he gave half of his possessions to the poor (Luke 19:1-10). A sinful woman once wet Jesus' feet with her tears, poured perfume on his feet, and wiped his feet with her hair while he was a guest at the house of Simon the Pharisee. Jesus pointed out that her act of love was prompted by her knowledge that her many sins were forgiven (Luke 7:36-50).

Good works are an expression of thanks for all that our Savior has done for us. Faith will and must produce good works. Indeed believers were created to do good works. Nevertheless, good works do not justify us. Rather they show that we are justified. St. Paul writes, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Luther puts it this way:

Faith is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us born anew of God [John 1:12-13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers...O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them...

Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God who has shown him this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.¹⁰

Good works flow from faith because faith was created to do good works. Good works, therefore, are a fruit of faith. The way to encourage fruits of faith is by encouraging faith. Our Savior often compares a Christian to a tree. He says, "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good" (Matthew 12:33). You don't have to pass a law or beat a tree so that it will produce fruit. It produces fruit because that is what fruit trees do. If you want it to bear more fruit, you fertilize and water it. Jesus told a parable about a fig tree whose owner wanted to cut it down because it had not borne fruit for three years. His servant replied, "Sir...leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down" (Luke 13:8-9).

¹⁰ *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vol. 35, pp. 370-371.

Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you nothing" (John 15:5). The power and ability to do good works comes from Christ. It comes; from our being in him and his living in us. The only way to, remain in Christ is through the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacraments. Therefore, the proclamation of justification, God's forgiveness in Christ, is the way to increase sanctification, the production of works that are truly good in God's eyes – works which flow from faith.

The apostolic pattern of encouraging sanctification points first to what God has done for the sinner and then speaks of the sinner's response to God. John writes. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought love one another" (1 John 4:10-11). As the gospel comforts it also motivates us to live according to God's will. The law then shows us God's will. It does not change us or move us to God-pleasing good works. It has no power to do so. But it informs us and instructs us so that we can know what is God-pleasing. As St. Peter demonstrates,

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men, whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and commend those who do right (1 Peter 2:9-15).

Why don't we always feel the confidence of faith or see it productive of good works as Luther described faith? We don't always experience that because a Christian not only has a new man, he also has an old Adam. Our faith or new man is always confident and productive of good works, but our old Adam is diametrically opposed to God and his will. It leads us into sin and hinders our enjoyment of Christian living. Perhaps part of the problem is that we are also tempted to make our own subjective standards of what we are to experience and see in our lives.

VI. True piety is careful not to set subjective standards for sanctification.

How do we know what pleases God? We look at his law, his will for our lives. Good works flow from faith and are done according to his will. In matters of adiaphora (things which God has neither commanded nor forbidden) the Christian's motivation becomes all-important. St. Paul reminded the Corinthians of the principles they were to follow so that they could know what to do in areas where God's Word gives no command. He reminded them that they were not to do anything for selfish reasons, or to do anything that would cause someone to stumble in faith, or to allow anyone to call something sinful which God has not. He also told them that even the common activities of life become God-pleasing when they flow from a heart of thanks. Paul writes, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). We serve God whenever we faithfully carry out whatever duties and responsibilities we have in whatever life's situation our Lord has placed us.

Wherever faith is, there will be fruits of faith. The Holy Spirit will bring forth the fruits he desires in our lives. Those fruits will be different in different people in different circumstances. When Jesus explained the parable of the sower, he said that the seed was the word. The parable represented what happens whenever the seed is sown, the Word is proclaimed. "Others, like the seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown" (Mark 4:20). Believers will vary in the quantity of fruit they produce.

Therefore we will be careful not to set false standards and be cautious about what conclusions we draw when looking at the lives of those around us. Some Christians might be better at speaking to others about their

Savior or explaining Christian doctrine than others are. Some might be better at giving care to the helpless and the hurting. Some fruits of faith might be hidden from our eyes. Judging merely by externals, we might be deceived as to the quality or the quantity of fruit. As the sainted Prof. John Meyer observed several decades ago,

We Christians are to use our earthly possessions and to contribute of them for the maintenance of the church and its work. Now concerning money matters, not all men are alike by nature. Some incline to be misers, while others are spendthrifts. When such men become Christians, their old Adam does not change. The miserly old Adam of the one remains miserly and causes the Christian very much trouble in matters of giving. A collection is to be taken up for some project of the church. The spendthrift readily contributes, say \$10.00, while the Christian with the niggardly old Adam has to fight a terrific battle with himself before he contributes, say \$1.00. Outwardly the one who so willingly contributed the \$10.00 appears to be the better Christian, while in reality the \$1.00 of the other may represent a much more glorious spiritual victory.¹¹

Luther liked to say that every Christian is *simul iustus et peccator*, at the same time saint and sinner. The Christian will not be rid of his sinful nature until he is in heaven. St. Paul understood the struggle that goes on inside the Christian, the struggle between the sinful nature and the new life that the Holy Spirit has created in us. He observed, "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:19). The struggle for St. Paul was so intense that he cried out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24) But Paul also knew where to look for strength and help. He concludes by writing, "Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25). The very struggle against sin is part of Christian piety and the life of sanctification. But that struggle is often hidden from the eyes of those around us.

When I was a prep dean and some students would get themselves in trouble, I would hear people say, "I thought that this was a Christian school!" They had rather subjective standards of what it meant to be a Christian. I would sometimes counter by saying, "Recognizing all the temptations these young people face and knowing that each of them has a sinful nature, isn't it amazing how little trouble they get into!" Their struggles against the sin in their own lives and the positive influence they had in keeping their friends from sin were not always apparent. Those things went on behind the scenes and out of sight. But they were nonetheless signs of true Christian piety.

Several years ago in one of our Lutheran elementary schools a student with learning disabilities won a class spelling bee. Her classmates gave her a spontaneous standing ovation because they understood how hard she had to work to win and wanted to encourage her. Who would have expected that fruit of faith from those fifth or sixth graders? And who would have known about it besides the teacher and those she chose to tell? The Holy Spirit produces the fruit he wants according to his standards, not ours. All we need to do is open our eyes.

We will also want to remember that in this life our sanctification will never be perfect. As St. Paul tells us, "Not that I have already obtained all this or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Philippians 3:12). Isaiah reminds us that even "our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). We give God the credit for whatever good there is in our lives. As the hymn writer puts it so well:

To you our wants are known;
From you are all our pow'rs.
Accept what is your own
And pardon what is ours. (*Christian Worship*, 322:2)

The Christian life is a life of struggle against the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. We can take courage and find strength for that struggle as we look to what our Savior accomplished in our place. For we know that our Savior has already won the victory over sin, overcome the world, and defeated the devil for us.

¹¹ John Meyer, *Studies in the Augsburg Confession*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995) p. 116.

VII. True piety lives in the victory of Easter and the comfort of our victorious Savior who is seated at the right hand of God.

There are many things to worry about today. The effects of sin are everywhere. We see terrorism and war, natural disasters and calamities, violence and crime. We have problems in our congregations and synod. We don't always meet our goals. Plans don't always work out the way we intended. Our lives don't always turn out the way we had hoped. In our lives and ministry we often seem to meet with more apparent failures than success. As a result we grumble and complain.

Such worry and despair, grumbling and complaining are the opposite of true piety. They are the result of taking our eyes off of our Savior, his triumph, and promises. St. Paul understood the remedy for such thinking. In the great resurrection chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians he explained the comfort our Savior's triumph gives us and pointed his readers to the glory that awaits them when Jesus raises them from the dead. He concluded the chapter with these words, "But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:57-58). Christ's victory is our victory. Christ's victory gives us hope and confidence. It gives meaning to our life and work.

The Savior who lived and died for us is also seated at the right hand of God ruling the universe for the benefit of his church, his holy people. As St. Paul informs us,

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. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for his church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Ephesians 1:18-23).

We can have total confidence because our salvation and everything that pertains to it is in the hands of our Lord and Savior.

What, then, shall we say in response to this? 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? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31-39).

We foster true piety by proclaiming our Savior's triumph and power. True piety consists in looking at our Savior's accomplishments, not at ours. It consists in trusting in his strength, not in relying on our own.

VIII. True piety recognizes the privilege and blessings of the holy ministry.

You and I can become frustrated in the ministry if we focus on what we want, on our plans, and our successes and failures. The ministry, however, is not about us. It is about our Savior, the souls purchased by his blood, and his plan and purpose. It is not about what we want, but what he wants.

Serving in the public ministry is a privilege. In his amazing mercy God allows sinners like us to

proclaim his message of salvation to other sinners so that they can join us in heaven. He has entrusted the precious treasure of the gospel to frail human beings, jars of clay as it were (2 Corinthians 4:7). He gives us the privilege of being his spokesmen. St. Paul writes, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making, his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:20-21). It makes no difference what the world might think of us. For our God declares. "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:15)

Our Lord looks for faithfulness as we carry out the ministry. Paul writes, "So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). God looks for faithfulness. He will produce the results he desires. As Paul reminds us, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

When we preach, our goal is not to have people leave the service saying, "What a great preacher!" Our goal is for people to leave the service saying, "What a great God and Savior!" When we teach, our goal is not to have a students leave feeling burdened by all sorts of things they must do as Christians, but to have them leave with the joy of salvation that makes God's will their joy and desire.

The gospel is not a product to be sold by us. It is a message to be proclaimed. Our greatest service is to let God speak to us and our people, rather than draw attention to ourselves. When people leave our services we want them to say, "Today God has come to me in his Word and sacraments. Today I have heard God speak to me. I have seen myself for what I am – a sinner who deserves eternal punishment. But I know that Jesus died for my sins and for the sins of the whole world. I now want to live for him."

We can be certain that God's blessings will rest on the faithful proclamation of his Word and the administration of his sacraments. He has promised us that his Word will never return empty but will accomplish what he desires. And our God cannot lie or go back on his promises.

The ministry is not about us. It is about our Savior and the souls purchased by his blood. True piety thrives when Jesus and his saving work remain our primary focus. True piety grows when the gospel is faithfully proclaimed, the sacraments are rightly administered, and the precious teachings of the Holy Scriptures are carefully taught and treasured.

Conclusion

There is no magic bullet or sure-fire method that will guarantee measurable growth in Christian piety and the Christian life. I cannot give you a self-help book that will offer a panacea for the Christian life and ministry. I can only point you to your Savior. I can only direct you to his means of grace. I can only urge you to distinguish properly between the law and the gospel and to proclaim both faithfully. I can only encourage you to rely on your Savior's strength and promises. But I can also be confident that only in this way can true piety be fostered and the Christian life be lived. God has promised that his Word will not return to him empty but will accomplish what he desires. And he cannot lie.

To him alone be the glory.