

TABLE TALK

Official Publication of the LMS-USA

...these words... shall be upon your heart; you shall teach them... and talk of them... Deut. 6:6,7



August 2017

Vol. 24 No. 3

S i n

by Rev. John Erickson



"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... [He] formed the man of the dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. God saw everything he had made, and behold it was very good" (Gen. 1:1; 2:7; 1:31).

God created man [our first parents] for a life of fellowship with Himself. There was one condition God gave them in relation to that fellowship. They were not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or they would die (Gen. 2:17). But they were deceived and disobeyed. They ate. And as a result, they were cast out of paradise. Fellowship with God their Maker was cut off. The result of that disobedience was the introduction of death into God's perfect creation (Gen. 3). And further... all who would descend from Adam, were (and are) made sinners (Romans 5:12,19).

In Luke 19:71 we read, "they all grumbled." Jesus had "gone in to be the guest of a man who [was] a sinner." The Jews of Jesus' day regarded all tax collectors as great sinners. Zacchaeus was one of the chief tax collectors, and was therefore thought of as a great sinner as one

who was particularly wicked.

Paul writes in First Timothy 1, how he was "formerly a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent." Then he shares how that "Jesus came into the world to save sinners," to which he adds, "of whom I am the foremost." Notice Paul does not say "of whom I *was* the foremost," but he says, "of whom I *am* the foremost."

It is interesting - people still refer to Las Vegas as "sin city." What do they mean?

Some time ago I received a letter in which several high school classmates had given a update on their lives. One classmate wrote how she was now married after having lived for several years "in sin."

All this begs the question, "What is sin?" We can somewhat understand a crooked tax collector, or any tax collector for that matter who was working for an oppressive government, to be a sinner. But Paul? Here was a man whose life was com-

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pletely turned around. That he *had been* a sinner... yes, that makes sense. But that he was at present, not just a sinner, but as some translations have it... that he considered himself a *chief* among sinners? And as for people's view of Las Vegas? or of persons living together outside the covenant of marriage? If such things are considered sin... does it really make any difference? Few seem to see these things as problems or have any worry over possible consequences.

The dictionary defines sin as 1) an immoral act considered to be a transgression against divine law; 2) an act regarded as a serious or regrettable fault, offense or omission. It would seem that most persons must, if anything, consider sin only in connection with its second meaning. Something needs to be bad to be called a sin. But who defines what is bad? Or if the second meaning is brought into play... then 'divine law' must only be thought of as something of human invention. There is certainly no thought given by most to the notion of a Divine Judge of heaven and earth setting down *absolutes*. And if sin should have consequences, at least in the case of most sins, those consequences must be thought to be minimal.

It was 5 years ago that a "Poll of the Day" was taken by *The Atlantic* (May 22, 2012). The poll was titled, *Americans' Attitudes About Sin*. **"Americans have few moral qualms about birth control or gambling. They think wearing fur, the death penalty, and abortion are more morally acceptable along with porn. And they think suicide, polygamy, and human cloning are more moral than cheating on your spouse.**

But the really fascinating data in the poll was in the way it ranked Americans' attitude toward a variety of other potential sins.

Gambling and divorce, both

frowned upon in old-time religion, are now broadly accepted, with less than a third of the public disapproving of either. But Americans' judgment of infidelity is harsh: 89 percent find the notion of married people cheating on their spouses morally unacceptable. That's more than disapprove of human cloning and polygamy (86 percent each) or suicide (80 percent).

Fur-wearing and stem-cell research are largely accepted (about 60 percent each), while slim majorities approve of gay sex and out-of-wedlock births (54 percent each). A majority, 51 percent, finds abortion morally unacceptable. (Not surprisingly, there are major partisan differences in the moral judgment of all of these.) And Americans are surprisingly disapproving when it comes to porn: Nearly two-thirds say it is morally wrong."

But let us look at the Bible. The Bible speaks of sin as rebellion against God (see Deut. 9:7; Joshua 1:18); and/or as lawlessness, i.e., breaking of the law of God (1 John 3:4). It all began with Lucifer who, as an angel, was not content with the position God had given to him. As a result, he was cast out of heaven. Lucifer then tempted our first parents with the enticement, "you will be like God" (see Genesis 3). In Romans 5:12 we are told that it was through the rebellion of Adam that sin entered into the world. And as a result, it has passed through all the generations down to our day. And according to the Bible, sin has consequences. The "wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

In Psalm 51:5, David explains, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." What was true of David is true of all. Every individual born into this world has within them a fallen nature. We are born sinners. We are not sinners because we sin. It is rather that we

sin because we are sinners. This is inherited or original sin.

There is also imputed sin. Impute means to ascribe to, or credit to. Something that belongs to one person is ascribed or credited to another. Paul writes about this in Romans 5:13. Before the law was given at Mount Sinai, sins were not imputed to man. People were still sinners because they had inherited sin. But after the law was given, people could commit acts *in violation of the Law*. These sins were then imputed to them. Paul tells us in verse 14... and this is important... "Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come." Even before the Law was given the penalty for sin existed. Therefore all people from Adam to Moses were subject to death. And why was this? It wasn't because of their breaking of the Law of Moses (remember that Law had not yet been given), rather it was because of the sinful nature which they had inherited. But once the Law was given on Mount Sinai, then all people were, and continue to be, subject to death both because of the sinful nature inherited from Adam and as result of violating the law of God.

Then there is also the sin that each one of us commits each and every day. This is personal sin. Because of the inherited nature we have from Adam, we find ourselves guilty of individual sins every day in our thoughts, words, and deeds, in what we do, and in what we fail to do.

If we look at some of the words we find in the Bible that refer to sin, we can come to better understand all that is included in the concept of sin. In the Old Testament we have the word, "RA," bad (Genesis 38:7); the word, "RASHA," wickedness (Exodus 2:13); the word, "ASHAM," guilt (Hosea 4:15); the word "CHATA," sin (Exodus 20:20); "AVON," iniquity (I Samuel 3:13);

"SHAGAG," err (Isaiah 28:7); "TAAH," wander away (Ezekiel 48:11); and the word, "PASHA," rebel (I Kings 8:50). These words clearly suggest that sin is disobedience against God.

We most commonly think most of our offenses as committed against another person or persons. But when we come to see the true character of our sins, we come to understand that they have been aimed chiefly against God, and that the sins against other persons are of little consequence compared with those against God. Consider David. Even after committing the crimes of adultery and murder... after he had inflicted the deepest injury on his fellow human beings... yet he felt that the sin he committed against God shut every other consideration out of view [see Psalm 51:4, "Against You, You only, have I sinned"].

In the New Testament we find the following words used in describing sin: "KAKOS," bad (Romans 13:3); "PONEROS," evil (Matthew 5:45); "ASEBES," godless (Romans 1:18); "ENOKHOS," guilt (Matthew 5:21); "HAMARTIA," sin (I Corinthians 6:18); "ADIKIA," unrighteousness (I Corinthians 6:9); "ANOMOS," lawlessness (I Timothy 1:9); "PARABATES," transgression (Romans 5:14); "AGNOEIN," to be ignorant (Romans 1:13); "PLANAN," to go astray (I Corinthians 6:9); "PARAPTOMAI," to fall away (Galatians 6:1); and "HUPOCRITES," hypocrite (I Timothy 4:2).

In the New Testament understanding there is always a clear standard against which sin is committed. And, as we found in the Old Testament, so in the New, all sin is ultimately rebellion against God and a transgression of His standards. The Parable of the Prodigal Son picks up on this and parallels what we saw in David in the Old Testament. In Luke 15:21 the prodigal addresses his Father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you."

The offenses had been committed mainly against God. But they were also to be understood as sins against his father [in the wasting of property which had been given him, in neglecting the counsel given, as well as in the plunging of himself into ruin]. The son felt that he had disgraced his father. In the same way, a sinner will be conscious of his sins against his family, relatives and friends, as well as against God. One who is truly penitent will be as ready to acknowledge his offenses against his fellow-men as those against his Maker. We note also in the New Testament that sin may assume a variety of forms, and it makes an individual's responsibility with regard to sin abundantly clear.

One of the New Testament words for sin, "HAMARTIA," is a comprehensive term and is most helpful to consider. It is the word Paul used when he wrote, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The Greek word is an archer's term meaning "to miss the mark." Sin, in other words, is missing the mark... missing the "dead center" of the standard required by God. It is the common practice among all men, women, and children to come up with one's own standard... or with the standard determined by society or by a government. But God has set His own standard of perfection for admittance into Heaven. And all people have "missed that mark" even as the arrow shot at a target might not only miss dead center bull's eye... but may miss the entire target.

In that we are by nature sinners, we cannot help but sin. For example... we don't do something we should do... or we do it but don't do it exactly right. We don't do enough of what we should do... or we overdo it. We do it grudgingly or with wrong motive. We do it for the praise we hope to receive... or in order that we might look good to others... or out of envy.

There is no way any one can ever meet the standard set by God. God demands absolute perfection and no individual can measure up. We try on the basis of intelligence, financial success, educational attainment, religious performance, and any number of other things. But none of these things impress God. He has set forth a standard and it is by that standard that He measures every individual. The verdict in every case has been the same, "You have come short... you have missed dead center." Romans 3:23 states it, "All have sinned and fall short..."

It is sobering. Each and every human being, man, woman, and child, is condemned three times over due to our inherited sin, our imputed sin, and our personal sin. And the just penalty for our sin is death (Romans 6:23). And by death we are not speaking only of physical death, but of eternal death - "Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon it; from his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and if any one's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:11-15).

If one takes what the Bible has to say about sin and our situation as sinners seriously, then that one cannot but exclaim with Paul, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24). But as Paul found, there is an answer. For this answer see the article beginning on page 9.

Are All Sins Equal?

Is Homosexual Practice No Worse Than Any Other Sin?

by
Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D.

In my work on the Bible and homosexual practice I often encounter the argument that (1) no sin is any worse than any other sin; therefore (2) homosexual practice is no worse than any other sin. Usually the comparison is then made with sins for which accommodations are often made by Christians (like gluttony or remarriage after divorce), rather than with sins for which no accommodation is made (like incest or murder), as a way of either shutting up Christian opposition to homosexual practice altogether or contending that self-affirming participants in homosexual practice will still "go to heaven." Even many evangelicals who neither support homosexual practice nor extend a pass from God's judgment to those who persist unrepentantly in it subscribe to these two views.

Sometimes these claims are buttressed by an analogy, such as when Alan Chambers, former head of Exodus International, declared at the opening night General Session of the 2012 Exodus International Conference: "Jesus didn't hang on the cross a little longer for people who... have been involved with same-sex attraction or who have been gay or lesbian." It comes across as a nice sound bite and can be helpful for those who think that homosexual practice is too bad to be forgiven by God. But it doesn't establish the claim that there is no "hierarchy of sin." The length of time that Jesus hung on the cross is irrelevant. It is the fact of Jesus' death that counts for atonement. Nor is anyone arguing that Jesus' death cannot cover big sins. It covers big and little sins for those who repent and believe in the gospel.

Put simply, Christ's universal coverage of sin through his death on the cross does not mean that all sins are equal in all respects but only that all sins are equal in one respect: They are all covered. If they were not, no one would enter the kingdom, for God is so holy that any sin would disqualify a person from entry if moral merit were the basis for acceptance.

Why an Egalitarian View of Sin?

First, many Christians are overeager to do whatever they can to soften criticisms from homosexualist advocates. The latter, many of whom are very good at being outraged at anything that disagrees with their agenda, go bonkers when they hear homosexual practice described as a severe sin.

Second, some are pushing an egalitarian view of sin at least in part out of pastoral concerns, so as not to turn off homosexual inquirers with a message that they might find hard to accept. The flipside of this is that they may want a theological basis for criticizing any sense of self-superiority or uncharitable spirit coming from the church. Some believe that the church is responsible for creating an angry and bitter "gay-rights" community by giving a pass to Christians involved in heterosexual sins while using the Bible to beat up on persons who engage in homosexual behavior.

What a Hierarchical View of Sins Ought and Ought Not Do

Let it be understood what the biblical view of some sin as worse than others does not entitle anyone to do:

1. Deny one's own sinfulness apart from God and need for Christ's

atonement.

2. Excuse one's own sin.

3. Treat others in a hateful manner or wish for them that they not come to repentance (in the manner of Jonah's initial view toward the Ninevites).

4. View anyone as immoral or spiritually inferior simply for the mere experience of urges to do what God strongly forbids.

On points 1 and 2, Paul believed both (1) that some sin is worse than others (idolatry and sexual immorality were major concerns, for example; and within the category of sexual immorality, he had particular revulsion for homosexual practice, then (adult) incest, then adultery and sex with prostitutes; Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 5; 6:9, 15-17; 1 Thess 4:6); and (2) that "all have sinned and fall short of God's glory" and can only be made right by God's grace through Christ's redeeming work (Rom 3:23-25). The two points are not in opposition or even in tension. The fact that all sin is equal in one respect - any one sin can disqualify one from the kingdom of God if one doesn't receive Christ - does not infer that all sin is equal in all respects - some sins provoke God to bring judgment upon his people more than others.

With respect to the third point, recognizing the special severity of homosexual practice should in no way lessen the pastoral love and care shown to persons acting out of same-sex attractions. On the contrary: The greater the severity of sin, the greater the outreach of love. This is the lesson that we learn from Jesus' outreach to tax collectors and sexual sinners... Jesus (and Paul) taught us to uphold love and an intensified sexual ethic at the same time.

Regarding the fourth point, no one is at fault merely for experiencing urges that one does not ask to experience and does not seek to cultivate. For example, the fact that

someone experiences same-sex attractions at all is not something for which one is morally culpable and does not in any way justify a designation of the person as morally depraved. Same-sex erotic desires, like any desires to do what God expressly forbids, are sinful desires (i.e., they are desires to sin), which is why the one experiencing the desires should not yield to them either in one's conscious thought-life or in one's behavior. Feelings of jealousy, covetousness, greed, pride, or sexual arousal for an illicit union are all sinful desires; but one isn't culpable for them unless one willingly entertains them in one's mind or acts on them in one's behavior.

Here is what the biblical view of different severity of sins does entitle one to do:

1. Use it to gauge the extent of another's movement away from God's grace and thus the level of intervention needed.
2. Deny that societal or ecclesiastical accommodations to some sins (like divorce and remarriage after divorce) justify accommodations to greater sins (adultery, incest, homosexual practice, pedophilia, bestiality). People can logically move only from greater to lesser offenses, not lesser to greater offenses.

God has given us all a sense of right and wrong with our consciences. We rightly have a sense that some actions are more evil than others and codify that sense in our laws, however imperfectly. Granted, even our consciences have been affected by the corrupting influence of sin, and nowhere more so than when we excuse our own sin. Moreover, our relative ordering of sins can be skewed by our own sinful desires. However, the principle that some sins are more heinous than others, not just in their effects on humans but also in the estimation of God, is God-given. If we didn't have that sense within our moral compass, society would be

far more perverse than it already is.

Scriptural Support for the View that Some Sins Are Worse Than Others

Supporting evidence for the view that the Bible regards some sins as worse than other sins is virtually endless so I'll stop after giving a nice dozen.

(1) In the Old Testament there is a clear ranking of sins. For instance, in Leviticus 20, which reorders the sexual offenses in ch. 18 according to severity of offense/penalty, the most severe sexual offenses are grouped first (20:10-16). Among the first-tier sexual offenses (along with adultery, the worst forms of incest, and bestiality) is same-sex intercourse.

(2) After the Golden Calf episode Moses told the Israelites, "You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to Yahweh; perhaps I can make amends for your sin" (Exod 32:30). Obviously the Golden Calf episode was a huge sin on the part of the Israelites, a point confirmed by the severity of God's judgment. There had to be lots of sinning taking place among the Israelites from the moment that they stepped out of Egypt. Yet only at particular points did God's wrath "burn hot" at the actions of the Israelites. Why so if all sins are equally heinous to God?

(3) Numbers 15:30 refers to offenses done with a "high hand" (deliberately and perhaps defiantly) as more grievous in nature than relatively unintentional sins (15:22, 24, 27, 29).

(4) In Ezekiel 8, Ezekiel is lifted up by an angel "in visions of God to Jerusalem" where he sees varying degrees of idolatry going on in the Temple precincts and the angel twice uttering the phrase, "You will see still greater abominations" after successive visions (i.e. things detestable to God; 8:6, 13, 15; cp. 8:17).

(5) Jesus referred to "the weightier matters of the law" (Matt 23:23) such as justice, mercy, and faith(fulness), which were more important to obey than the tithing of tiny spices, even though the latter, too, had to be done (Matt 23:23).

(6) Jesus famously pinpointed the two greatest commandments (Mark 12:28-31). He also said, "Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments (of the law) and teaches the people (to do things) like this will be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:19).

(7) I would submit that Jesus' special outreach to economic exploiters (tax-collectors) and sexual sinners, all in an effort to recover them for the very kingdom of God that he proclaimed, was not so much a reaction to their abandonment by society as an indication of the special severity of these sins and the extreme spiritual danger faced by such perpetrators. In this connection one thinks of the story of the sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, wiped his feet with her hair, kissed them with her lips, and anointed them with ointment (Luke 7:36-50). Jesus explained her extraordinary act by telling a parable of two debtors: the one whom the creditor "forgave more" would be the one who would "love him more." The clear inference is that the sinful woman had done something worse in God's eyes.

(8) Another obvious instance of prioritizing some offenses as worse than others is Jesus' characterization of "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" as an "eternal sin" from which one "never has forgiveness" - in context referring to the Pharisees' attribution of Jesus' exorcisms to demonic power (Mark 3:28-30).

(9) According to John 19:11 Jesus told Pilate, "You would not have any authority against me if it had not been given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me

over to you has greater sin." The reference is either to Judas (6:71; 13:2, 26-30; 18:2-5) or to Caiaphas the High Priest (18:24, 28). "Greater sin" obviously implies that Pilate's action is a lesser sin.

(10) Paul talks about different grades of actions in 1 Cor 3:10-17: One can construct poorly on the foundation of Christ and suffer loss while still inheriting the kingdom. However, to "destroy the temple of God," the local community of believers, over matters of indifference would bring about one's own destruction at the hands of God. This destruction is contrasted with being "saved ... through fire" over the lesser offenses.

(11) If all sin is equally severe to God then why did Paul single out the offense of the incestuous man in 1 Cor 5, among all the Corinthians' sins, as requiring removal from the community? Why the particularly strong expression of shock and outrage on Paul's part? Furthermore, if there were not a ranking of commands, how could Paul have rejected out of hand a case of incest that was adult-consensual, monogamous, and committed? If the values of monogamy and commitment to longevity were of equal weight with a requirement of a certain degree of familial otherness, Paul could not have decided what to do.

(12) First John 5:16-17 differentiates between "a sin that does not lead straight to death" (for which prayer may avail and rescue the offender's life) and "a sin that leads straight to death" ("mortal sin," for which prayer will not avail).

These twelve examples should make clear that the contention that the Bible nowhere indicates some sins to be worse in God's eyes than others is without merit.

Where Christians sometimes get mixed up on the issue is in thinking about Paul's argument for universal sin in Romans 1:18-3:20. Yes, Paul does make the point that all human

beings, Jews and Gentiles alike, are "under sin" (3:9) and "liable to God's punishment" (3:19). In fact, his point is not merely that "all sinned and fall short of [or: are lacking in] the glory of God" (3:23) but also that all have "suppressed the truth about God" and about ourselves, accessible in the material structures of creation (1:18-32) or in the direct revelation of Scripture (2:1-3:20). Paul argues: We can't say that we sinned but didn't know that we sinned. We sinned and did know (somewhere in the recesses of our soul) or at least were given ample evidence to know. In short, all are "without excuse" for not glorifying God as God (1:20-21).

What Paul is saying is that any sin can get one excluded from God's kingdom if one thinks that one can earn salvation through personal merit or make do without Jesus' amends-making death and life-giving resurrection. What Paul is not saying is that all sin is equally offensive to God in all respects. The argument in Romans 2, for example, is not that Jews sin as much (quantitatively) and as egregiously (qualitatively) as Gentiles on average. Any Jew, including Paul, would have rejected such a conclusion out of hand. Idolatry (1:19-23) and sexual immorality / homosexuality (1:24-27) were not nearly as much of a problem among Jews as among Gentiles (obviously "the common sins" of 1:29-31 were more of a problem). Rather, the argument is that, although Jews sin less and less egregiously than Gentiles on average, they nonetheless know more because they have access to "the sayings of God" in Scripture (2:17-24; 3:1, 4, 9-20). So it all evens out in the wash, so to speak, as far as needing to receive God's gracious work in Christ is concerned (3:21-31).

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For a copy of the entire article go to:
<http://www.robagnon.net/articles/homosexAreAllSinsEqual.pdf>

I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins

A sermon by Rev. Paul R. Harris
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People think, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins" is the easiest statement of faith to drive your life with. After all St. Augustine said, "The Christian life differs from the faith of the devils in the last articles of the Creed: 'I believe in the forgiveness of sins,' etc." So if you're a Christian belief in the forgiveness of sins must certainly drive your life. Not so fast. Of all the articles of the faith, this is probably the hardest to actually use.

For one thing the free forgiveness of sins is not even on natural man's radar. The Muslim keeps his Five Pillars believing there is forgiveness in them; the Mormon keeps the commandments of God believing this cleanses away the stain of sin. And billions of non-religious people believe their acts of kindness, charity, and goodness offset their sins. Believing your sins are forgiven by faith in what Christ did is just simply nonsense to fallen man. Forgiveness is the only thing everyone believes you must work for in order to get. Lots of people believe you can learn a foreign language without studying, lose weight without diet or exercise, and learn to speed read without effort, but no one, I mean no one, believes naturally that their sins can be forgiven freely... not even you and me.

How many times have you thought: "Forgiveness can't be this easy? It can't be a matter of simply believing that God put my sins on Christ and has put His righteousness over me." Or how many times have you felt shame for something you did, said, or perhaps even just thought and heard the promise of the free forgiveness of sins and said to yourself, "I haven't felt bad long enough to be forgiven"?

This is where most of us are. Forgiveness as an article of faith isn't certain enough for us. We want to make forgiveness an article of sight. Rather than confessing "I believe in the forgiveness of sins," we want to say I "touch, feel, or see" it. How many times have you come away from the altar, a sermon, or a worship service saying, "I don't feel forgiven"? And in search of a feeling, a seeing, a touching of forgiveness you are ripe for two errors. Salvation by works and contemporary worship.

Salvation by works satisfies the hunger we have to feel forgiven by making us feel we've earned it. Unrelenting guilt for real or imagined sins can be dealt with for awhile by putting money in a collection plate, by putting your time in on a church pew, by doing something for the less fortunate. You can offset before men, and even in your own mind, your sins by doing good things. But on your deathbed, hopefully before, you will be confronted by the terrifying wrath of God which no appeal to your works can appease and it will devour you and send you to hell.

The broad path to this horrifying end is contemporary worship. How can I say that? Well, why do congregations say they go to it? People aren't getting anything out of the liturgy. They don't feel uplifted. Although in the liturgy forgiveness is given out in Word and Sacrament, people don't feel it. Now

friend, if your doctor gives you medicine and you say, "I don't feel it," does he sing, dance and entertain you to make you feel better? He might change your medicine but neither he nor you believe that entertaining you, getting an emotional response from you is a key to your physical health. So why do people believe that about spiritual health? Because natural man demands to see, feel and touch forgiveness and puts no stock in believing it.

However, unless you believe in the forgiveness of your sins, there is no other way for you to have it. Lutherans confess this against Catholicism which says the Sacraments work without faith even if a person is an unbeliever. But our stating that you receive forgiveness only through faith doesn't do away with the Sacraments as the Protestants have. They say faith does everything and the Sacraments are just outward signs which don't give forgiveness at all. The Lutherans maintain that faith is necessary for receiving the forgiveness of sins, but confess against the Protestants that God distributes forgiveness through the Sacraments: Baptism, Absolution, and Communion. These 3 are where faith is to seek the forgiveness of sins.

Faith is the means of receiving the forgiveness of sins in Word and Sacraments because forgiveness is in them as a promise. Go back to the upper room. Jesus takes Bread in His hands and commands, "Take eat; this is My Body" but promises it is "given for you." And Jesus takes the cup of wine in His hands and commands, "Take drink; this is My Blood" but promises it is "poured for you for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus here makes the promise that in Communion His Body and Blood are present to forgive the sins of those who eat and drink it.

You can't see His Body and Blood. You only see Bread and Wine. And you certainly can't see forgiveness there, can you? But faith goes by what Jesus says and not what it sees and feels. Jesus promises the forgiveness He won on the cross by giving up His holy body in place of your sinful one is in His Body on the altar. Jesus promises the forgiveness He won on the cross by pouring out His blood to cover up your sins is in His Blood on the altar. You receive His Body and Blood orally, by mouth, but you can only receive the promise of forgiveness that is in His Body and Blood by faith. That's how it is with all promises. If I promise to give you a bike for Christmas, you can only get enjoyment, hope, comfort from that promise by believing it.

By confessing, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins," you're saying you don't expect to see it or feel it. It's yours by faith. But don't mistake this for what many American's believe, i.e., as long as I have faith in my heart I'm saved even if don't go to Church, am not absolved, and don't commune. How can they know they have faith in their heart? Americans, following the Protestant faith, say, if I feel or see that I have faith then I do. Don't you see? This makes forgiveness an article of sight not faith. No, a Lutheran knows he or she has faith in their heart not by looking into their heart, what mess that is, but by whether or not they are using the things God promises to work faith by: Word and Sacraments.

Lutherans believe, according to our Large Catechism, that they can't have forgiveness of sins apart from the holy Christian Church and the Word and Sacrament found there: "We believe that in this Christian Church we have the forgiveness of sins which is granted through the holy sacrament and ab-

solution." "Everything in the Christian Church is so ordered that we may obtain daily full forgiveness of sins through the Word and through the Sacraments." And finally, "Although we have sin, the Holy Spirit sees to it that it does not harm us because we are in the Christian Church where there is full forgiveness of sins... But outside the Christian Church there is no forgiveness." You're outside of the Christian Church if you're not where the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are distributed according to how Christ instituted them.

Can you see how this confession, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins" is to drive our life? We don't say I see or feel it, so when we look in the mirror and see a wretched sinner or when our hearts feel condemned for what we have done, thought, or said, we are not to despair. We don't expect to look in the mirror or feel in our heart our forgiveness. We are free to ignore the image in the mirror and the feeling in our heart, and go by what God promises He has done and will do for us in Word and Sacraments.

And just what does He promise? God promises that as many of you who've been baptized have put on Christ. So, when God looks at me He sees Christ and surely He can find no sin in Him. Likewise in absolution, Christ promises that the words you hear, announce God's forgiveness in heaven. And finally God promises that Communion is the Body His Son gave up to redeem your body and it's the Blood He shed to cover your sins. So Communion is good, sweet, powerful medicine able to give forgiveness, life and salvation to our body and blood because it is the Body and Blood of Christ.

So where does this confession, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins" drive us? To Church: to font, pulpit, and altar. Those who do not attend worship services with any sort of regularity belie their confession by their actions. By not being found in God's house, they're confessing that they believe the forgiveness of sins is located somewhere else, either in their pious little heart or in what they do. On their deathbed, but hopefully sooner, they'll see there is no forgiveness in either place. Then the terrors will set in. And the only way to calm those terrors is to have the forgiveness Jesus won on the cross given to them.

Well, here there's plenty of forgiveness. As the Catechism says, "In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers." So even though you may have despised Word and Sacrament by not attending Church, or by not believing that Word and Sacraments really forgive your sins, there's still forgiveness for you here, enough to get you all the way to heaven and to enrich your life on earth.

A life driven by the confession 'I believe in the forgiveness of sins,' is free from the tyranny of feelings because it rests on Jesus winning my forgiveness on the cross and giving me forgiveness through His Church on earth. But can such a life withstand the storms of life? Consider this: when Jesus wanted to prepare His disciples in the upper room to face the coming night where their sinfulness, the devil's power, and death's fury would all rage, all He gave them was Word and Sacrament. This was all they needed to face the coming crisis, and it's all we need as well. Christ's victory over sin, death, and the devil is given to us in Word and Sacrament. So hear, believe, eat, drink and win. Amen.

Table Talk
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The LMS-USA is Lutheran Church body describing itself as *Biblical, Confessional, Evangelical, Liturgical and Congregational*. It is a 'Forum' in which there is an on going discussion of theological issues and concerns among clergy and lay alike. The LMS-USA meets annually for a Theological Conference and this publication, besides carrying news of the Ministerium and Synod, functions also as a vehicle for this continuing dialogue.

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