

The Restoration of the Divine Image Through Christ

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Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In this same Savior, dearly beloved hearers.

"Let us make man in our image after our likeness." According to the first chapter of Genesis the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, expressed in these words the counsel of His eternal love to call the human race into existence. Shortly thereafter we read, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him." (Gen. 1:27).

Consequently, when man thus came from the hand of God, he bore the image of God in himself. Wherein this image must have consisted is not difficult to guess, for everyone knows that an image is a reproduction having some identity or at least visible similarity with the original. Therefore, when it is revealed to us that God created man in His own image, this simply means that originally man resembled God, yes, in a certain sense was like God. Whoever saw man saw God's attributes shine in him. Man's whole essence was a faithful copy of God and a lovely, bright reflection of His glory. As the sun is mirrored in a calm sea, so the Created was reflected in newly made man.

If we want to know what really was reflected in man, we need but picture to ourselves the nature of God. For everything God possesses in greatest perfection He, out of eternal love, used to adorn man in the measure befitting a creature. In His essence God is an eternal, omnipotent spirit. Therefore man who was created in His image was originally immortal also. His body was eternally young and vigorous, without sickness, without pain, never tiring and without the seed of death and corruption. Neither heat nor cold could harm him. Reflecting God's omnipotence, he was stronger than any other earthly creature. He ruled all the animals on earth by his command and will, moving among them as their lord and king.

Moreover, according to His intellect God is the eternal, complete and perfect truth and wisdom. Thus man created in His image was also originally full of truth, wisdom and heavenly light. Without any error and wearisome learning man knew God's essence and will. He knew himself and his own true destiny without self-deception. All creation lay before him unveiled. His bright spirit penetrated without hindrance all the mysteries of nature and all its amazing powers.

According to His will God is, moreover, the most perfect holiness. Man who had been created in His image was, therefore, also originally holy. What God wanted, that also man wanted. Man's will was in the most beautiful harmony with God's will. God was his greatest treasure. He truly loved God above all things and his neighbor as himself. No sin, no evil desires, no unholy thoughts dwelt in man's breast. His body also was free from every sinful incitement, an unspotted temple of the Holy Spirit. Therefore no sinful word ever crossed his lips, and all his works were good, for they were all done in God.

Finally, according to His state God is also perfectly happy. In this respect, too, man was a faithful reflection of this most happy Being. Since man was without sin, no restlessness, no anxiety, no fear filled his heart and conscience. He not only loved God, he also knew that he was loved by God, that He was his gracious God and Father. Peace, rest, and the purest joy dwelt in his soul. In addition, God had placed man into a paradise where there was nothing but what could delight the heart, the eye, and all senses. Nor did any curse lie upon the earth at that time. No troubles, no evil dwelt upon it. The tears which men wept were only tears of love and joy. In short, man was happy in time, and his earthly dwelling was an outer court of heaven itself.

See, my friends, such was the condition of man when he still bore God's image in himself. He was more glorious than could be described, more happy than we could grasp and imagine. But alas! what happened? By the seduction of Satan, man fell into sin, and sin in turn robbed us of God's image, divested us of our original adornment, hurled us from the peak of the most blessed good fortune into darkness, death, and ruin, and made this world an arena of misery. Who is not compelled to agree? Who does not experience in himself that by nature he is no longer fortunate and happy, and that this world is not a paradise but a vale of tears? He who wants to deny this must willfully close his eyes to the misery which surrounds him and which dwells in himself.

Yet blessed are all who truly realize in agony what they have lost, and yearn to recover the glory which was trifled away! For God's Son appeared in the world for no other reason but to restore God's work which was destroyed, to bring back what we have lost, in a word, to restore in us the divine image of which we were robbed. Let me speak to you further on this point.

Scripture text: Mark 7:31-37. And again, departing from the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, he came unto the sea of Galilee, through the midst of the coasts of Decapolis. And they bring unto him one that was deaf, and had an impediment in his speech, and they beseech him to put his hand upon him. And he took him aside from the multitude, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spit, and touched his tongue; And looking up to heaven he sighed, and saith unto him, Eph-pha-tha, that is, Be opened. And straightway his ears were opened, and the string of his tongue was loosed, and he spake plain. And he charged them that they should tell no man: but the more he charged them, so much the more a great deal they published it; And were beyond measure astonished, saying, He hath done all things well: he maketh both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak.

My friends, whatever Christ once did to those suffering physical misery was a picture of that which Christ mainly wanted to do to men: He wanted to take all misery from man and bring him back to the glory which God once had created in him, and which he had lost. Christ came to restore the image of God in man. Let me speak to you of

THE RESTORATION OF THE DIVINE IMAGE THROUGH CHRIST,

1. How it Begins Already in this Life, and
2. How it will be Perfected in the Life to Come.

Lord Jesus Christ, You not only want to forgive us our sins, but You also want to help and free us from them. You want to renew in us the image of God in which we were once created. Awaken in us a holy longing for complete freedom from sin and for the lost treasure of a perfect innocence. Take from us the idea that while we are absolved from sin we need not forsake it completely, lest we finally through the deceit of sin trifle away our salvation. May we rather here and now let ourselves be transformed into Your image from one brightness to the next through Your Spirit, until we come to the light of eternal perfection. Amen.

[1. How the Restoration of the Divine Image Begins Already in this Life]

My dear hearers, as I already stated in the introduction, it cannot be denied that we no longer are as God originally created us. Our reason alone finds it absurd to assume that the almighty, all-wise, holy God should have created beings burdened with sickness, distress, and death; with error, blindness, and darkness; with sin and all impurity; with discord, unrest, fear, anguish, and pangs of conscience. But such a being man now is. He is aware that he is destined for a different world, yet is subject to death, thousands of different kinds of illnesses, and countless evils.

He is more powerless, helpless, and needy than many irrational creatures. By nature he knows nothing certain about God and His will, yes, is a mystery to himself. His thoughts and endeavors are only evil from his youth. In all this, he is full of unrest. He travels through this world without inner peace as through a valley full of tears and misery. Judge for yourselves: Had God created man and the world as they are now, could we really agree with the Bible's statement: "And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good"? (Genesis 1:31). Of course not!

Of this there can, therefore, be no doubt: this world, and in particular we men, are now no longer in our original state. We still have the light of reason by which we are distinguished from the animals. But it is only like the ruin of a former glorious, lovely edifice. It is but a memorial of a former better state. But we have lost the true image of God. Our reason has become darkened and without the divine light which could show us the way to salvation. Our will has turned away from God. Our heart is alienated from the life which is from God. Our state is unhappiness. Our bodies are the dwelling of mortality. For instead of God's image we all bear in us the image of sin and of physical and spiritual death.

But blessed are we! We are not destined to remain in this misery. For that very reason God's Son became like us, that we should again become like God. He assumed the likeness of a sinner to bring us back to the likeness of God.

Thus John writes, "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil." (1 John 3:8). And Peter preaches, "Whom (referring to Christ) the heavens must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began." (Acts 3:21). Consequently we dare not think that God's Son became a man only to fulfill the Law for us by His holy life. He did not suffer for our sins and die on the cross only to win for us the forgiveness of our sins, to deliver us from the punishment we deserve, to reconcile us with God, and despite our sins unlock heaven and salvation to us. This is how many see Christ. They, therefore, seek nothing in Christ but comfort for their restless conscience. That they should actually again become holy is of no concern to them at all. However, they are caught in a great most dangerous error.

In our text Christ not only mercifully received the deaf and dumb man and assured him of His grace, He also treated him, actually healed him from all his infirmities, restored hearing and speech to him and made him a healthy man. Exactly thus Christ not only wants to forgive all men their sins, but also to free them from their sins. He not only wants to declare them righteous by grace, but He also wants to make them truly righteous. He not only came to comfort and soothe their hearts, but also to cleanse and sanctify them. He came not only to reconcile them with God, but also to reunite them with God, not only to make them acceptable to God, but to make them like God. In short, He came to restore the entire lost image of God in them. He came to lead them back into the state of innocence, to make them perfectly healthy in body and soul, and thus finally to bring them to the blessed goal for which God destined them from eternity and called them into existence.

Of course, the first thing which Christ must do in the sinner is to forgive him his sins. For no one can atone for his sins himself and make them right. However, if Christ did no more with sin but forgive it, He would not be a perfect Savior. If He would leave men in sin, He would also leave them then in unhappiness. True blessedness of necessity means that sin actually is abolished, wiped out, crushed and destroyed in us.

The moment, therefore, a person believes in Christ with his whole heart, Christ not only forgives him all his sins, but He also gives him the Holy Spirit who battles against sin in the flesh and cleanses the heart more and more from it. The moment, therefore, a person accepts Christ's grace, sin also loses dominion in him. Hatred against sin is, as it were, the first impulse of the divine image which Christ restores in man. But this hatred of sin reveals itself also in that the person regrets, deplors and abhors his sins daily, and humbles himself before God and men because of them. He also prays against continuing in sin, is on guard against temptation to sin, notices the gentlest stirrings of sin in his heart, arms and strengthens himself against sin from God's Word. Thus he unceasingly strives against sin, including his dearest pet sins. He tries to be rid of every sin with all his might.

Everyone whose sins are truly forgiven through Christ does this. And he who does not thus yearn and strive to be completely freed from his sins certainly does not stand in Christ's grace. For to whom Christ gives grace, to him He also gives power. To whom He grants forgiveness of sins, to him He also gives hatred of sin and zeal to fight against it. Whom Christ graciously receives, as He did the deaf and dumb, his infirmities of soul He also begins to heal.

However, he who wants only forgiveness of sins from Christ, yet wants to cling to many sins, not wanting to be completely healed of sin by Christ, makes Christ a servant of sin. He does not believe in the true Christ at all. He has a false Christ, and will perish with his self-made "sin-Christ." Oh, how many thousands who live carelessly without daily struggle against sin will, therefore, some day discover that they have deceived themselves.

Not only is the abolition of sin in man part of the restoration of the divine image, but also man's renewal and sanctification. It is indeed true that no man can work any righteousness which avails before God. Therefore Christ fulfilled the Law for us, so that, believing in Him, we might be declared righteous by grace for His sake. But we dare not think that Christ by His grace abolished the Law, and that now we need not fulfill it. Definitely not!

The Law is the declared, eternally unchangeable will of God. It is, therefore, not in the least revoked by the Gospel. It must, therefore, be fulfilled to the very smallest letter not only by Christ but also by every individual person. Just this - to bring man again to this ultimate, completely perfect fulfillment of God's Law - is the final purpose of the whole redemption of Jesus Christ. Clearly He says, "Think not that I am come to destroy the Law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the Law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven; but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:17-19). Therefore St. Paul also says, "Do we then make void the Law through faith? God forbid; yea, we establish the Law." (Romans 3:31).

First Christ attributes His fulfillment of the Law to those who believe in Him, and thus by grace makes them righteous before God. But this does not imply that they can now boldly transgress the Law, but rather, that as children of God they again become willing and capable of fulfilling the Law and finally come to the perfect image of God to which they were created. Once people are pardoned, the call of the Letter to the Ephesians goes out to them, "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." (Ephesians 4:23, 24). And again we read in the Letter to the Colossians, "Put off the old man with his deeds, and put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him." (Col. 3:9, 10).

Examine yourselves according to this, my dear hearers! You say you are righteous through Christ, that is, through faith. Good! But remember: if that has actually happened to you, if Christ has really bestowed His righteousness upon you, then Christ will also have awakened in you the sincere desire to fulfill God's Law yourselves, to know God's essence and will truly, to love God above all things, and to serve Him in true righteousness and holiness. Then you will also have received from Christ a new heart delighting in the Law of the Lord, and desiring to speak of His Law day and night. But if you have no zeal to fulfill God's Law yourself, then your "faith" in Christ's fulfillment is a mere fleshly comfort. For he who is really owned by Christ's grace is also transfigured by it more and more into God's image.

[2. How the Restoration of the Divine Image is Perfected in the Life to Come]

My friends, all this will become still clearer to us as we now secondly ponder that the restoration of the divine image through Christ will be perfected in the life to come.

Surely through His grace Christ heals His believers even here of their natural blindness, opens the eyes of their spirit, kindles in them a heavenly light, and again works in them a true knowledge of God. Nevertheless here they do not yet come to that complete perfect knowledge man once had when he originally bore God's image in himself. Even the most enlightened Christian must confess, "We know in part."

It is also quite certain that through His grace Christ even here cleanses His believers from sin, gives them a new heart, and makes them radically changed people. He works hatred of sin, true love of God and one's neighbor, and zeal in sanctification and all good works in them. Nevertheless, here their will is never as sanctified as it was in the state of innocence. They never attain full perfection. Perfect sanctification in this life is a dream of blinded, boasting enthusiasts. Everyone, even the most zealous Christian, must say with Paul, "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:12).

It is certain, too, that those who are justified through faith also receive peace of heart through our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet here they never have the undisturbed peace man enjoyed in Paradise. Very often even believers must groan with David when they do not feel their faith, "There is no rest in my bones." (Psalm 38:3).

Finally, while even in this world Christ truly makes His kingdom of heaven for His believers, they are often keenly aware that they are still in the land of temptation, tears, and death. Even those Christians strongest in the faith must, therefore, often confess with Paul, "We are willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." (2 Cor. 5:8).

No, Christ's Church on earth is not a mortuary. His believers are all spiritually alive. Yet His Church is not a house of the healthy, but an infirmary, a hospital where everyone awaits perfect health of soul. Here Christians have only the first-fruits of Christ's harvest. The full harvest has not yet come to them. The nature of Christ's kingdom of grace here is the blossoming of spring. The time of full maturity only comes with eternal life.

But blessed are all Christians! That time will surely come. As Christ in our Gospel restored the deaf-mute not only in part but completely, so He will also restore in the world to come the image of God to which they were originally created in all who truly believe in Him. Yes, there by His grace the redeemed will shine more gloriously than they would have had they not fallen.

There knowledge in part will cease and all of Christ's redeemed will be permeated with the light of perfect knowledge. There sin will be abolished completely; Christ's redeemed will be filled with perfect love and shine in the adornment of perfect innocence and holiness. There also the last germs of fear and restlessness will be destroyed, and Christ's redeemed will enjoy a perfect peace in the most holy, the most blessed perfect fellowship with God. There all misery will end, and Christ's redeemed will again have entered the gates of Paradise once closed but now opened to them - a Paradise more beautiful than the one once assigned to man on earth in the beginning. There will be no more death but eternal life, eternal joy, eternal blessedness in God's presence. (Rev. 21:4). In short, there Christ's redeemed will awaken fully restored in God's image. They will see and experience that through His redemption Christ has built again a world more beautiful than the one ruined by sin.

Therefore, if we read of the first creation, "And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good," at the sight of the second creation all the redeemed will cry out so much more, "The Lord hath done all things well!" (Mark 7:37).

Is there really anyone among us who would not wish to awaken again some day in the perfect image of God? Surely no one! Well, then, if you want this, allow Christ to heal your soul here on earth. May no one be so foolish as to seek in Christ only forgiveness and not also freedom from sin, only to be declared righteous, and not also to be sanctified!

This is and indeed remains inseparable: Whoever wishes to be and to remain pardoned by Christ, must also let himself be made holy and perfect by Him. Therefore, he who will not allow a beginning of the restoration of God's image to be made in him here, will also not awaken perfected in God's image in the world to come. Amen.