

# **They Err Who Deny Preachers the Power to Forgive Sins**

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## **First Sunday After Easter**

Grace be with you, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ Jesus.

One of the distinctive teachings of our Evangelical Lutheran Church is that the Christian Church and its called servants have the power to forgive sins. Our Church has never, shall we say, timidly and ashamedly but with great earnestness and joyful resolution confessed this to the world.

We read in Luther's oldest Small Catechism: "Confession embraces two parts. One is that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the pastor as from God himself, and in no wise doubt, but firmly believe, that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven."

The pastor is then commanded to ask each penitent, "Do you also believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness? Whereupon the penitent should answer with a confident, "Yes!"

In the year 1530 Lutheran princes, lawyers, and theologians were called upon in the name of our Church to present their confession of faith in Augsburg before the emperor and the realm; even there they in no way denied the teaching of the power of the Church to forgive sins but openly confessed it as a precious treasure of the correct, true Evangelical teaching. We read in the 25th Article of the Augsburg Confession: Our people are taught that they should highly prize the absolution, as being the voice of God, and pronounced by God's command. The power of the Keys is set forth in its beauty, and they are reminded what great consolation it brings to anxious consciences; also, that God requires faith to believe such absolution as a voice sounding from heaven, and that such faith in Christ truly obtains and receives the forgiveness of sins.

You see that our Church in her glorious basic confession attaches such great importance to the doctrine of absolution, that he who renounces this doctrine cannot possibly have the same spirit as our fathers who claim the name Lutheran.

As you know, those who deny absolution picture it as something false and dangerous, battling against it every possible way. They explain this doctrine as a relic of the papacy, an invention of tyrannical priests, a pillow for carnal secure people who do not wish to be converted. Perhaps many a weak Christian has had doubts raised by this blasphemous language. What should we do? Should we decide that our Church has been wrong in this point? Should we renounce it and start a new reformation of the 19th century? Far be it! If we search God's Word we would find that in also this teaching our Church stands upon the unchangeable foundation of the divine Word, that all who fight against this teaching fight against Christ, against His Word, against His merit, and against His true Church.

Let us, because our text offers us the opportunity, explore this more closely.

*Scripture text: John 20:19-31. Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord. Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained. But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.*

*And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. Then said he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.*

*And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.*

Scripture has three main passages in which the doctrine of absolution has its real seeds: the first is contained in Matthew 16, the second in Matthew 18, and the third in today's text. On the basis of our text, permit me to show you that

## **THEY ERR WHO DENY PREACHERS THE POWER TO FORGIVE SINS.**

By this error

1. The Clearest Words of Christ are Contradicted;
2. The Complete Atonement of Christ is Denied; and finally,
3. Men are Robbed of the Greatest and Most Necessary Comfort.

{PRAYER:}

Lord Jesus Christ, you have given your believers the authority to absolve their brothers and sisters from their sins in your name; you have especially instituted the office which preaches the reconciliation; graciously protect us that we do not haughtily and self-righteously despise your comforting institution. Recognizing your love to us in it, may we use it to the comfort and salvation of our souls. To that end bless the present sermon for the sake of your death and resurrection. Amen.

## [1. The Clearest Words of Christ Are Contradicted]

The error of denying preachers the power to forgive sins is greater than one might think. It contradicts the clearest words of Christ.

After his resurrection Christ says to the apostles in our text, "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained." Quite a while before his death Christ had said the very same thing first to Peter and then to all the disciples. To Peter he said, "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:19). And a few days later Christ repeated these words to all the disciples when he said, "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 18:18).

In these words the power of forgiving and retaining sins is so clearly conferred upon the Church and her servants that it needs no proof. Those who deny the Church this power commit a great sacrilege. They contradict God's Son to his very face and call his words lies. They commit the very sin by which Satan misled man when he said, "Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden"? (Gen 3:1).

The words of the Son of God are so clear and powerful that even the enthusiasts often act as if they also believe in the Office of the Keys. But be not deceived by such admission. They say that Christ gave the apostles only the power to reveal the conditions under which a person should receive or be excluded from the forgiveness of sins. But who has ever heard that one forgives sins by stating the conditions under which he could receive forgiveness? That is not explaining Christ's words but refuting it, not expounding but perverting it, not opening its sweet comfort but taking it out and locking it up, in short, treating it as a joke, treading it under foot.

But, they say, where did the apostles absolve as do the preachers of the Lutheran Church? I answer: It is true, that at the time of the apostles there were no chancels from which the formula of absolution was read; true, they had no confessional where the hand was placed on the head of those who wanted to go to communion and the forgiveness of sins pronounced after their confession. Although we do not find this method of procedure, this rite, this ceremony of the office of the keys in the apostolic Church, we find the same facts.

When the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, "Be not deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God," (I Cor. 6:9-11), what else is this but a public absolution which Paul pronounced upon the repentant Corinthians? Yes, whenever the apostles assure the Christians, "Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus," "Ye are saved by grace," etc., what else is this but the Lord saying to the man sick of the palsy, "Son, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee"? Furthermore, when Ananias said to Saul, "Arise and be baptized and wash away thy sins," what else is this but as if Ananias had said: Let me absolve you?

The apostles gave themselves the power to forgive sins, and they also exercised it. In II Corinthians 2 we read that an incestuous person was punished by the whole Corinthian congregation so severely that he stood at the brink of despair. What did the Apostle Paul do? He wrote the following to the congregation, "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrawise, ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him. ... To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also; for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ." (II Corinthians 2:6-8.10). My friends, can it be more clearly stated that the apostles in Christ's stead and in the name of the congregation actually forgave sins?

This evidence is so clear that many foes of absolution dare not deny that at least the apostles had the power to forgive sins and used it. But they say: How will one prove that today's preachers of the Gospel also have this power?

Does not St. Paul say in another passage, "Are all apostles?"

I answer: It is true, there is a great difference between an apostle and a present-day minister of the Church. The apostles were infallible, present-day ministers are not. The apostles had the power to do miracles and prophesy, present-day ministers do not. The apostles were called directly by Christ, present-day ministers are called mediately through men. The apostles had the call to go into the world, present-day ministers are limited to the field of the congregation which they are assigned. But as far as the office of preaching the Gospel is concerned there is no difference. Or does the word of the Lord, "Preach the Gospel" apply only to the apostles? Does the command, "Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" apply only to the twelve? Does his command, "This do in remembrance of me" apply only to the chosen disciples?

No; speaking of those to whom they would preach, Christ especially says, "Teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you." As certainly as that command to teach, baptize and celebrate Holy Communion concerns the Church of all ages, as certainly as all that was commanded the disciples should be kept, so certainly is also the command and promise directed to the Church of all times, "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain they are retained." And just as certainly do the words of Matthew 18 apply to the Christians and Churches of all times, "If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he shall not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more. ... And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church; but if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican," I say, as certainly as these words are directed to the Christians and congregations of all times, just so certainly are also the words which immediately follow, "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

## **[2. The Complete Atonement of Christ is Denied]**

This great error is so ruinous because it also denies the complete redemption of Christ. It is true, my friends, that the sectarians also express the truth that Christ has completely redeemed all men. One dare not however let this blind and persuade him to believe that they

actually believe and preach this truth. It is only too clear that if they express this once they deny this truth a thousand times by the way they teach salvation.

For what does this mean: Christ has completely redeemed us? It means: Christ has done and suffered everything for us which we should have had to suffer and do in order to be saved.

We do not have to blot out our sins; Christ has already blotted them out. We do not have to reconcile God; Christ has already reconciled Him. We do not have to merit God's grace; Christ has already earned it for us. We do not have to fulfill the Law for our salvation; Christ has already fulfilled it. We do not have to procure a righteousness which is admissible before God; Christ has already procured it. We do not have to conquer death, the devil, and hell; Christ has already conquered them for us. We do not have to earn our own worthiness in order to enter heaven; Christ has already earned it for us. In short, we do not have to complete the work of our salvation; Christ has already completed everything, drained the cup of our deserved suffering to the very last drop, paid our debt to the very last penny, and done the will of God to the very last letter.

Now what can we conclude? This, that this can, yes, *must*, be preached to all men.

Preaching the Gospel is merely saying to all men: Sinners, rejoice! Christ has already blotted out your sins; Christ has already reconciled you with God; Christ has already earned God's grace for you; Christ has already fulfilled the Law; Christ has already procured a righteousness for you which avails before God; Christ has already conquered death, hell, and the devil; Christ has already earned the necessary worthiness for your entrance into heaven; in short, Christ has already completed the work of our salvation!

Do not suppose that you must first reconcile God through any suffering and atone for your sins. Do not suppose that you must do good works, that you must save yourself by your repentance, by your remorse, by your improvement, by your struggles, by your wrestlings. No! This has already taken place. You should merely receive what Christ has already done and suffered for you, appropriate it, comfort yourself with it, believe it, walk and remain in this faith, and finally be saved through this faith.

You see, since Christ has completely redeemed all men, the Gospel is nothing else than the preaching of the forgiveness of sins or announcing it to all people, to which God himself says his Yea and Amen in heaven. In a word, it is a general absolution which is brought by men to the whole world, sealed with Christ's blood and death, and confirmed by God himself through his glorious resurrection. Just because the Gospel is an absolution for all men because of the completed redemption of the world, a preacher can and should assure every person who desires forgiveness that in God's name his sins are forgiven.

What do they do, who deny to preachers of the Gospel the power to forgive sins? They deny them the power to preach the Gospel to all men in its true meaning. They deny Christ's complete redemption which is the preaching of the Gospel. Yes, they who deny the power of forgiving sins lack faith in and the true knowledge of that perfect redemption. If someone believes that Christ has blotted out the sins of all men, how can he take offence when a preacher or a layman says to one who confesses his faith in Christ: Thy sins are forgiven thee? If someone believes that Christ won grace for all men, how can he take offence when a preacher or an ordinary Christian assures a person who believes this: You have also found grace? If someone believes that all men are

already reconciled through Christ's death and justified by God the Father through His resurrection, how can he be surprised that in God's name through absolution this is actually given him by a preacher or a Christian brother, and that nothing is asked of him but to accept it in faith as though he heard the voice of God himself?

Our Church teaches in all its purity and fullness that Christ has completely redeemed all men, that a person is righteous before God and will be saved alone by grace through faith; for that reason our Church has also held fast to the precious doctrine of absolution. As long as the doctrine of justification alone through faith shines brightly in our Church, so long it will not let the comfort of the absolution be taken away. However, if one does not have the article of justification alone by grace through faith in its purity, infernal darkness must enter, one must deny the power of the absolution, and with it the perfection of Christ's redemption.

### **[3. Men are Robbed of the Greatest and Most Necessary Comfort]**

Finally, this error is so great because it robs men of the greatest, the most needed comfort. Permit me to speak to you of this.

It seems as though there would be sufficient comfort left even if absolution were rejected.

Do not also the opponents of absolution have the Gospel? Do they not also have Baptism? the Holy Supper?

It is true they have these if they have not denied and rejected these things according to their essence. However, because they reject the power of absolution, they removed the comfort which they all contain. Is not the comfort which lies in the Gospel this, that the Gospel gives forgiveness of sins to all who believe it? Is not the comfort which lies in Baptism this, that Baptism "works forgiveness of sins and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this as the words and promises of God declare"? Is not the comfort of Holy Communion this, that "forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation is given us through these words: Given and shed for you for the remission of sins"? But the opponents of absolution take this comfort, the very heart, out of all these means of grace and leave their hearers nothing but the empty shell.

Do not suppose that I accuse the sectarians of something of which they are not guilty. Sad to say, it is only too true. Do not they themselves publicly say: Whoever relies on the mere Word has a dead faith. The letter kills; the Spirit, the Spirit who makes alive, must do it? Do they not even blasphemously teach that about Holy Baptism? Do they not say "How can washing with water help you? That is a powerless ceremony; the Spirit, the Spirit must do it"? And do they not speak just as contemptuously of Holy Communion? Do they not say: "What does the eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood profit you? Must you not partake of his spirit which is the true nourishment of your souls"?

My friends, do not believe that only the rejection of absolution is involved in the question whether a preacher has the privilege of daring to say the words: I forgive you your sins in the stead of Christ. No; this denial has a deeper foundation. It deals not only with the question whether the Word of God is merely a direction to true Christians and whether the Holy Sacraments are merely powerless ceremonies, but whether both Word and Sacraments are actually the means, the tools, the hands through which God offers, gives and seals to us grace and the forgiveness of sins. The question involved is whether a person can actually rely on the

Word of the Gospel and the promises which are united with the Sacraments as on God's voice, even if one's heart and conscience says No to God's promises and condemns us. It therefore confirms the highest, the comfort we sinful human beings most need.

Though the sects may reject this comfort, let us hold the more firmly to it. Though false teachers may despise us for doing so, let us not despise God who has given us this means for imparting and assuring us of his grace. Though enthusiasts may rely on what they do and suffer and experience, on their prayers, on their struggles and wrestling, on their self-denial, on their visions, on their feelings, on their repentance and sanctification, we will rely on what God has done for us and what he gives us in His Word and holy Sacraments.

Undoubtedly also among the sects there are many true children of God who are in the state of grace and will be saved. But they will not be saved through their great exertions, nor through their many works, nor through their prayers, running, and chasing, but alone through this, that they find no peace in all their efforts and finally come before God naked and destitute, relying alone on the Word of grace.

Let us therefore not wait until we are nearly in our last hour to reject all our doings, works, righteousness, and worthiness before we hold fast alone to the Word and Sacraments. Let us even now begin to throw this ballast overboard, so that our little boat does not sink in the storms of temptation and death. Let us build on that word which announces grace to all in preaching and imparts it to us especially in absolution. Let us build on our Baptism by which we have been received into God's covenant of grace; for this covenant stands firm forever. Let us build on the comfort of the Holy Supper whenever we partake of it. There Christ gives us His body and blood as pledges that we have a share in His redemption.

That gives us that comfort which will remain even if our heart condemns us; that gives us that very comfort in the hour of death, even if our whole life accuses us and the world and Satan appear against us; that gives us comfort for the day of judgment, for God will, he must, keep what he has promised.

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