

Dear Friends in Christ,

Missionaries who work in China reported at the sad attempts of the people to appease the anger of their idol-gods. They pretend to give them money, it only is paper copy of money. In the case of the Chinese the deception is all the more foolish since the idols whom they worship are only man-made gods of wood and stone. How much more foolish it is to imagine that a person can deceive the all-wise and all-knowing God who says, "I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what he deserves." Jeremiah 17:10 *Treasury of Themes and Illustrations, R.C. Rein, 1983, page 316*)

Does that Bible passage make you nervous? The Apostle Paul calls on us to examine our own hearts. We are to check and see if there is real repentance and true obedience. We don't have to be afraid! The same Gospel Ministry, which is what Paul was engaged in, provides the forgiveness and the power for us to repent and obey. The reason is because Jesus is at the heart of the Gospel ministry. Let's look at this so you can...Examine Your Heart in the Light of Gospel Ministry

1. Are you repentant?

The Corinthian Christian congregation was in Greece. Corinth sat in the middle of a major trade route for Europe and the east. People from all over the ancient world could be found in Corinth. The Corinthian congregation was likely a mixture of not only Jews and Greeks, but there were probably Macedonians, Romans, Persians and others. We know from the letter of 1st Corinthians that these people did not always treat each other well or show love. So the apostle Paul had call them to repent. St. Paul met his co-worker Titus and received the report that there had been a change of heart in many in the congregation. Paul was happy. However, as he makes his way to visit them again, he is concerned that some of them are still unrepentant. So he writes the letter of 2nd Corinthians. As a part of this letter he warns that the Corinthians should examine their hearts in the light of his words. They needed to answer the question, "Are you repentant?" This is a question that we need to answer too!

A. St. Paul carried out a ministry of preaching God's Law and God's Gospel. In verse 5 he says, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves." When Paul writes "test yourselves", he means they were to test their hearts based on the Law and Gospel he had proclaimed.

1. In his letter of 1st Corinthians St. Paul told these Christians that they needed to repent because they were guilty of quarreling, dissensions, law suits, sexual immorality and drunkenness. The Corinthians repentance bears out that these were real sins.

Do you take time to count your sins? You really can't do it, if you don't take a look at God's word. God's 10 Commandments and other portions of his word draw a sharp contrast between

holy living and our lives. We may feel that we outwardly keep his commands. The Lord explains that we must be perfect in words and thoughts. It doesn't take us long to understand that we are horrible sinners, because we are loveless, divisive and immoral even if it just in words or thoughts. Proper examination of self will also show that we do the wrong thing or fail to do the right thing more than we think.

Then comes the next step which is called contrition. Are we horrified at our sins? We are horrified when we see some else's child being a selfish monster and throwing a fit in a public place. Are we also horrified, when in a cross and irritated tone chew out a waitress or employee because we didn't get what we paid for? Are we crushed and looking to God because we sin against him daily and he should disown and condemn us? This is repentance.

2. St. Paul also reminds the Corinthians, "Christ Jesus is in you." The apostle mentions that he did not like crushing people with the law, he would much rather proclaim the Good News of the Gospel. In this same letter he had reminded them that "One died for all." (2 Cor. 5:11-15) and "The world was reconciled to God through Christ." (5:16-6:2) Yes, our sins horrify and crush us, but Jesus endured the horror of the cross and was crushed for our sins. The result was that he had reconciled or brought back the Corinthians and us to God.

St. Paul is showing that it is okay to examine our hearts because despite any pain or embarrassment, there is help and healing in the forgiveness of sins in Jesus. If anyone in Corinth was unrepentant, they needed to show real repentance but there was also real grace for them in Christ.

B. Some people had questioned the power of Paul's ministry. He states in verse 6, "And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test." The apostle's ministry had not failed in a proclamation of Law and Gospel. The changed lives of the majority of the Corinthians showed this. They had gone from hopeless heathens to hope filled Christians.

I have a simple question for you, "Is Jesus good for you?" In no time you respond, "Of course Jesus is good for me!" "Is Jesus good for you in Matthew 21, the Gospel reading, when he calls you to real repentance?" Now you don't answer so quickly, but you answer with courage born of your faith, "It is not easy to listen to his call to repentance, but I do listen." There are many ministries today that don't call for spiritual self-examination. Self-examination will at times be painful and many people don't want to hear it.

Your WELS pastors remain committed to the Gospel Ministry which involves Law and Gospel preaching. It is the only ministry that changes the heart. The preaching not only calls us, but through the Holy Spirit works repentance and faith in the forgiveness of sins in Jesus. The repentance of many Christians and the peace they enjoy in Jesus is a testimony to effective WELS ministry. Perhaps there are people here today or people that you know that are holding back. Speak to them. Encourage them. Self-examination in the light of the Gospel Ministry is healthy and effective. It gives us what we need.

2. Are you focused on doing what is right?

The Apostle has another question on his mind. Real repentance leads to true obedience. So he wants the Corinthians examine themselves with another question. "Am I focused on doing what is right?" This we can ask of ourselves.

A. St. Paul does not stand on the sidelines. He gets involved through prayer. He prays, "Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong...so that you will do what is right."

1. Paul understands that once sin is a part of our lives, our culture it is hard to say, "no." It is like an addiction. So he is praying that the Lord will help them not only to say they are repentant, but to give them the strength to live in repentance which is giving true obedience to God.

I have had people tell me that they can't let go of a sin, particularly in connection with a physical and mental addiction to drugs, alcohol, etc. The secret to change is God's Word. In Isaiah 55 we are told that God's Word is powerful and active. It is the Word that brought us to faith and kept us in the faith in the first place. The reason the Word and Sacraments are powerful means of grace is because Jesus, God's Son stands behind them. Jesus died and rose and ascended into heaven. He has all power. So through him we can live a truly righteous and obedient life.

2. St. Paul adds a little comment, "though we may have seemed to fail." Enemies of Paul were saying in the congregation that Paul's preaching was weak and his ministry was a failure. There wasn't a moment that went by that Satan wasn't trying to destroy Paul's preaching. At every moment today, Satan is trying to destroy the ministries of pastors and lay people who proclaiming Law and Gospel, Sin and Savior. He whispers "weak" and "fake."

Paul says, "I am not writing you to defend myself to prove that I have stood the test." His only concern was their spiritual wellbeing and growth. That is what faithful pastors are concerned with today.

B. The Apostle concludes, "For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth." He is indicating that every pastor faithful to Jesus must speak the truth. We proclaim Law and Gospel no matter how unpopular and weak it looks. (I mean "weak" in the sense that the church doesn't seem to grow.) We cannot set aside the truth. We don't want to because this is about saving people's souls.

If you ever go to a church and you are not sure if the pastor is a faithful shepherd, listen to him preach or get a paper copy and read it. Is he faithfully proclaiming Law and Gospel? Without that there cannot be real repentance and true obedience. So we strive here in our church to faithfully proclaim Law and Gospel.

Conclusion: In the first of his Ninety-five Theses nailed on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Martin Luther wrote: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, Repent! He makes clear that the whole life of his believers is to be a constant or unending repentance...He

does not want us to think alone of inner repentance. Yea, inner repentance is nothing and not repentance unless it outwardly effects all manner of crucifixion of the flesh." *Treasury of Themes and Illustrations, R.C. Rein, 1983, page 316)*

The call to true repentance may make us anxious. We do not have to worry! As St. Paul calls us to repentance he reminds us that the Gospel Ministry does not fail. Not only does it call us to real repentance, but it brings our Savior, Jesus to us in Word and Sacrament. It reminds us that all sins are taken away including our botched attempts at repentance. With Christ living in us we can work at truly repentant Christian living. We will never be perfect this side of heaven, but we can get better at it. Don't be afraid. Examine your heart in the light of the Gospel Ministry. It is good! Amen.