

**“For God So Loved the World”**

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,  
that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).*

There is no more familiar passage in the Bible than John 3:16. It’s one of the first verses many of us memorized, and this simple statement from Jesus has almost become a cultural cliché. It shows up on billboards and bumper stickers, it boldly adorns t-shirts and hats, and how often have we seen a fan displaying a John 3:16 poster as the football floats through the uprights?

With so many cultural connotations it can be difficult to honestly contemplate this reading. But today, I want you to strip away all of your assumptions and associations with this iconic verse and consider what it truly means. And it all starts with these words, “For God so loved the world...” There’s no question that these words are comforting, but as we ponder John 3:16, it’s also important to see the shocking nature of this phrase.

“For God so loved the world...” Jesus spoke these words to a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee who felt trapped in a Law-driven life and couldn’t see a way out. His colleagues were no help and his attempts at self-improvement had all come up empty. So, one night, under the cover of darkness, Nicodemus came to talk with Jesus because Jesus was unlike anyone Nicodemus had ever met. This miracle worker from Galilee taught about a new life instead of continuing to toil on the tired treadmill of worldly righteousness and self-promotion. Nicodemus needed help, so he went to Jesus. And, to this man who was plagued by brokenness and sin, Jesus said, “For God so loved the world...”

So, what do these words that have come to color our cultural ethos really mean? To answer this question, I want to tell you the story of a man named Henry Gerecke. Henry Gerecke was Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod pastor who died in 1961. During and after World War II, Pastor Gerecke served as an Army Chaplain in Europe, and, in his memoirs, he wrote the following: “Nearly 2,000 years ago, three crosses were erected at Golgotha. There in the midst of them hung Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. On either side were crucified two convicted criminals. One of them, in the last moments of his sinful life, repented and appealed for pardon, and (he) was transported into paradise. The other died unsaved and passed into eternity. The cross is no longer there, but the value and the preciousness of Christ’s perfect work of redemption remain unchanged. Salvation in Christ is still the same for all souls as it was in that day.”

These words may not seem all that remarkable, and in some form, we hear them every week, but these reflections take on a new meaning when you understand the story of their author. You see, Pastor Gerecke not only served as an Army chaplain who care for Allied troops in World War II, but this LCMS pastor was also selected as the man to minister to the Nazi war criminals who were tried at Nuremberg.

Chaplain Gerecke had gone to England 1944, and there, for 14 months, he attended to the dying and wounded. After the War ended, Gerecke was part of the contingent that visited the Nazi death camps and was an eyewitness to the atrocities at Dachau. At age 52, Chaplain Gerecke had completed his duty and was hoping to go home to his family when, on July 15, 1945, he was summoned to Nuremberg. The Army had selected Gerecke for three reasons. First, like many Missouri Synod pastors of his generation, Gerecke spoke fluent German. He also had extensive experience in prison ministry before the war, and, finally, he was a Lutheran, and 15 of the 21 Nazis on trial at Nuremberg identified themselves as Lutherans.

The Colonel who asked Gerecke to take on this unique task told him that this assignment was the most “unpopular in the entire Army” and although he was a committed and conscientious pastor, Chaplain Gerecke confessed that he had grave concerns about serving at Nuremberg. In his memoirs, he wrote, “(How can) I greet these men who have brought such unspeakable suffering on the world and are the

cause of the sacrifice of so many millions of lives? My two only sons were also victims of their misdeeds. How could I possibly bring myself before such men that they would be willing to receive God's word?"

In all honestly, most of the world would have said these men deserved no mercy, no consideration, no compassion, and certainly no chaplain of Christ to minister to them with the Word of God. To those who had lost homes, businesses, or family members at the hands of the Nazis, no punishment, penalty, or pain would have been too harsh for these monsters. These were the masterminds responsible for the abuse, torture, and systematic death of millions of people and, in fact, 80 years later, their names are still infamous. Yet, after great spiritual conflict and much soul-searching, Henry Gerecke agreed to the assignment and began to serve these men who were, by any human standard, beyond saving.

"For God so loved the world." After meeting with the Nazi prisoners for the first time, Gerecke was forced to deal with these words in ways that most of us can't begin to imagine. As he struggled to reconcile the message of the Gospel with his own feelings of disdain, he later recalled, "I passed the night in prayer, asking God to give me a message for them. For these men must hear something of the Savior who suffered and died on the cross also for them." As the chaplain began to preach the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the world heard words of public accusation and condemnation. Privately, Pastor Gerecke kept preaching and in brief worship services, Gerecke told these horrible men how Jesus Christ had sacrificed Himself for the salvation of sinners... *all* sinners.

On October 1, 1946, the verdicts at Nuremberg were handed down. A few of the men were acquitted, others were sentenced to prison, and the worst of the Nazis leaders were condemned to die for their crimes against humanity. On October 16, 1946, the world watched as those men mounted the steps of the gallows, and many rejoiced as the guilty were hung. But Chaplain Gerecke saw something different. During the months it took for the trial to unfold, the chaplain had seen the Holy Spirit acting in the lives of some of these men. In the shadow of death, having lost all things, some of these criminals came to rely on the promises God made to lost sinners, and they not only confessed their terrible sins, but also their faith in Christ Jesus and their reliance on the grace of God alone and, in their last days, Pastor Gerecke commended them to the mercy of God.

This is by no means a feel-good story. It is an ugly glimpse of the world that demonstrates the depth of our sin and the reality of justice. And yet, in the story of Henry Gerecke we hear the voice of Jesus speaking to Nicodemus and we are challenged to consider what these words truly mean: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." The scandalous truth of the Gospel is that Jesus came to bear the sins of the world, and His death on the cross is a death that paid for them all!

I share this story with you today so you will know and believe what St. Paul meant when he wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9). And I share this story with you today so that will understand and believe the Lord when He says that, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." I tell you this story today so that you will know beyond any doubt that this promise of Jesus is for you!

The cross is not pretty. The cross is not comfortable. But on the cross of Jesus, our sin was punished, we have the forgiveness of our sins, and the gift of eternal life is ours. Henry Gerecke understood Jesus' words. They changed his heart and they gave him good news to share. And, today my friends, Christ's words do the same for us: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold

**The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
March 18, 2012**

**“God Loved the World”**

*“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son,  
that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).*

There is probably no better-known, or more frequently-quoted verse in the entire Bible than today’s text from John 3. This is one of the first verses many of us memorized and I’m sure that most, if not all of us, can recite it without hesitation. John 3:16 has been called “the Gospel in a nutshell” and, in our country today, this simple section of John’s Gospel has almost become a cultural cliché. It shows up on billboards, it boldly adorns t-shirts, and just last month, building on the witness of Tim Tebow who frequently sports the famous verse on his game day eye black, Focus on the Family actually ran a thirty-second ad in the Super Bowl that featured a group of children reciting John 3:16. It’s a heartwarming, feel-good ad that concludes with a beautiful, wide-eyed little girl staring into the camera and exclaiming, “Wow!”

With so many cultural connotations it can be difficult to reflect on such an iconic verse and consider the meaning of the text apart from all of the associations our society has attached to it. My hope for us today, is that we can do just that; that we can strip away all of our assumptions and consider what this powerful verse really means. And it all starts with these words, “God so loved the world.” There’s no question that this is a comforting and assuring thought, but as we ponder Jesus’ words in John 3:16, it’s important that we don’t miss the shocking nature of this phrase, because *we* don’t love the world.

I think I can say that there are parts of the world that I love. I love and I’m thankful for my wife and daughters every day. I’ve loved the cool, crisp, beautiful mornings we’ve had this past week. I enjoy reading a good book or navigating a bubbling river in a canoe. On Thursday, I got to visit the perfect, little newborn son of young couple in our church. These are great parts of life in this world. These are things I love.

But there’s another side to all of this that I don’t love or even like. I don’t like how my back hurts when I run. I don’t like the arguments and conflicts that sometimes ignite in my family. I hate traffic jams. I don’t like it when people are mean or selfish and yet these trivial things are nothing compared to the gut-wrenching realities of this sinful world. More often than any of us would like to admit, this broken world brings us to tears as we see senseless cruelty and unnecessary suffering, as we deal with unpunished crime and witness unspeakable abuse of power and people and as we are touched by the pain of loss and the bitterness of grief. And I’m sure that you would join me in saying that I don’t love this part of the world.

Now, I truly hope that you are having a great day and that as you are listening to me you are reflecting on some of the wonderful blessings that you treasure in this world and some loving people that God has brought into your life. But, I also know that today some of you are really struggling and *you don’t love the world*. You don’t love the loneliness you’re feeling. The health struggles that you’re going through may have left you depressed. Perhaps your marriage is falling apart and you don’t know what you’re going to do. Maybe an addiction is destroying you and the people you love or, for any number of other reasons, your life simply hasn’t turned out the way you thought it would and *you don’t love the world*. And when you are brought to this place of disquieting and uncomfortable honesty, the language of John 3:16 can work in a new and critically important way.

In today’s text Jesus told a man named Nicodemus, “God so loved the world.” Nicodemus was just like us. He didn’t love his world all that much. He was a religious leader who felt trapped in a helpless and desperate life and He didn’t know a way out. His friends weren’t helping and his good intentions and failed attempts at self-improvement had come up empty. So one night, under the cover of darkness, he snuck away to meet Jesus. Jesus was unlike anyone Nicodemus had ever met. He was doing miracles. He was teaching about a new life instead of the tired, old, false façade based on worldly status and the keeping up of appearances. His life was falling apart and Nicodemus needed something help, so he went to Jesus. And, to this man who was plagued by brokenness and sin Jesus said, “God so loved the world.”

So what do these words of Jesus that have come to saturate our cultural ethos really mean? And why does it matter? To answer these questions I'd like to tell you a story that I discovered this week about a man named Henry Gerecke. Henry Gerecke was a pastor in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod who died in 1961. During and after World War II, Pastor Gerecke served as an Army Chaplain in Europe and in his memoirs he wrote the following words: “Nearly 2,000 years ago, three crosses were erected at Golgotha. There in the midst of them hung Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. On either side were crucified two convicted criminals. One of them, in the last moments of his sinful life, repented and appealed for pardon, and was transported into paradise. The other died unsaved and passed into eternity. The cross is no longer there, but the value and the preciousness of Christ’s perfect work of redemption remain unchanged. Salvation in Christ is still the same for all souls as it was in that day. The attitude about the cross decides the eternal destiny. Faith in Jesus and His shed blood gives evidence of sins forgiven and God’s merciful hand saves from the place of eternal torment those whose faith is in Christ.”

These words may not seem all that remarkable, in fact you could probably make the case that in some sense these words are spoken in this church every week, but these reflections take on a new meaning when you understand the story of their author. You see, Pastor Gerecke not only served as an Army chaplain who saw unspeakable suffering in the wake of World War II, but this LCMS Army chaplain was also selected as the chaplain to minister the war criminals who were tried at Nuremberg.

Chaplain Gerecke had gone to England 1944 and, for 14 months, he attended to the dying and wounded. After the War ended, Gerecke was part of Allied contingent that visited the Nazi death camps where he was a firsthand witness to the atrocities at Dachau. At age 52, Chaplain Gerecke had completed his duty and was hoping to go back to United States and rejoin his wife when, on July 15, 1945, he was summoned to Nuremberg, Germany where he was asked to serve as the chaplain to the most infamous of the surviving Nazi leaders awaiting trial for their horrific crimes. The Army had selected Gerecke for three reasons. First, like many Missouri Synod pastors of his generation, Gerecke spoke fluent German. He also had extensive experience in prison ministry prior to the war and, finally, he was a Lutheran and 15 of the 21 Nazis on trial identified themselves Lutherans, while the six remaining prisoners claimed to be “Roman Catholic.” The Colonel who asked Gerecke to take on this unique task told him that this assignment was widely considered the most “unpopular in the entire Army” and although he was a committed and conscientious pastor, Chaplain Gerecke confessed that he had grave concerns about serving in this way. In his memoirs he wrote, “Must I greet these men who have brought such unspeakable suffering on the world and are the cause of the sacrifice of so many millions of lives? My two only sons were also victims of their misdeeds. How could I possibly bring myself before such men that they would be willing to receive God’s word?”

In all honestly, most of the world would have said these men deserved no mercy, no consideration, no compassion, and certainly no chaplain of Christ to minister to them with the Word of God. To those who had lost homes, businesses or family members at the hands of the Nazis there was no punishment, no penalty, no pain that would have been too harsh for these monsters. These men were the masterminds of the Third Reich responsible for the abuse, torture and death of millions of people and, in fact, over 60 years later, many their names are still infamous. And yet, after great spiritual conflict and soul-searching, Henry Gerecke agreed to the assignment and began to serve these men who were by any human standard beyond saving.

*“For God so loved the world.”* After meeting with the Nazi prisoners for the first time, Gerecke was forced to deal with these words in way that most of us can’t begin to imagine and, as he struggled to reconcile the message of the Gospel with his own feelings of disgust and the reality of the evil with which he had come face to face, he later recalled: “I passed the night in prayer, asking God to give me a message for them. For these men must hear something of the Savior who suffered and died on the cross also for them.”

Turning to Scripture, the chaplain began to preach the story of Jesus’ life and death and resurrection. In the months that followed, the world heard words of public accusation and condemnation. Privately, Pastor Gerecke kept preaching and in brief worship services, Gerecke told these horrible men how Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, had sacrificed Himself for the salvation of sinners...*all sinners*. On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1946, the verdicts at Nuremberg were handed down. For a few of the men there was acquittal; others were sentenced to prison. The worst of the Nazis leaders were condemned to die for their crimes against humanity. On October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1946, the world held its breath as those men mounted the steps of their gallows and many rejoiced as the guilty were hung. But Chaplain Gerecke saw something different. During the months of the trial the chaplain had seen the Holy Spirit acting in the lives of some of these men. In the shadow of death, having lost all things, including their lives, some of these criminals came to rely on the promises of God made to lost sinners, and confessed not only their terrible sins but also their faith in Christ and their reliance on the grace of God alone and, in their last days, they commended themselves to the mercy of God.

This is by no means a feel-good story. And I guarantee that this would never be featured in a Super Bowl commercial. It is an unsavory and ugly glimpse of the world and one that demonstrates the depth of our sin and the reality of justice...and yet, in the story of Henry Gerecke we hear the voice of Jesus speaking to Nicodemus in the night and we are challenged to consider what these words truly mean: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that *whoever* believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." The scandalous truth of the Gospel is that Jesus came to take on the sins of the world and His death on the cross is a death that pays for them all! I share this particular story with you today so you will know and believe that what St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians is true: "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" (Ephesians 2:8-9). And I share this story with you today so that will understand and believe the Lord when He says that, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." I tell you this story today so that you will know beyond any doubt that this promise of Jesus is for you! The cross is not pretty. The cross is not comfortable. But in the cross of Jesus our sin has been punished, we have the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of eternal life is ours.

You can actually listen to a recording of a lecture in which Chaplain Gerecke tells the story of his experiences at Nuremburg and in his closing remarks Gerecke makes an impassioned statement to his listeners. He says, "Remember friends, we've got a Gospel to give to the world that we should thank God for on our knees" (<http://www.stjohnchester.com/Gerecke/Gerecke.html>).

Henry Gerecke understood Jesus' words. They changed his heart and they gave him good news to share. And friends, Christ's words do the same for us. "*For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). This is our Gospel to give to the world. Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold

I shared this story because I want you to know: if the Lord can reach into the hearts of Nazi war criminals; if He can forgive the multitude of their misdeeds and rescue and redeem them from eternal death and damnation, He most certainly can do the same for you and me. Believe and cling to the Cross

## OLD TESTAMENT Numbers 21:4-9

### *The Bronze Snake*

**<sup>4</sup> They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; <sup>5</sup> they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" <sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup> The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.**

**21:4** With Moses' determination not to engage Edom in battle (see **note** on 20:20), the people became impatient with him and with the direction the Lord was taking them. Flushed with victory, they were confident in themselves. They forgot that their victory over Arad was granted by the Lord in response to their solemn pledge (v. 2); now they were ready to rebel again.

Following the thirty days of mourning, Israel sets out from Hor to go around Edom (Num 20:20-25). Attention to these places indicates that Israel was going back to where they started from. They were walking in circles. On the road going nowhere, they begin to believe that the Lord's delays are his denials. – Even this generation, which was removed forty years from the life of Egypt, repeated the complaints of the first generation. (PBC)

**21:5** WHY HAVE YOU BROUGHT US UP OUT OF EGYPT – Egypt never looked so good as when the Israelites were in the desert. In the wilderness all they remember is the fleshpots of Egypt, not the whips and the bricks. They go even so far as to call Egypt a land flowing with milk and honey (Num 16:13). Once they had to slave for their bread under the lash. Now they pick up manna for free. But impatience has clouded their memory.

*we detest this miserable food!* The people's impatience (v. 4) led them to blaspheme God, to reject his servant Moses and to despise the bread from heaven. This is the most bitter of their several attacks on the manna (see **note** on 11:7). Just as Moses' attack on the rock was more than it appeared to be (see **note** on 20:11), so the people's contempt for the heavenly bread was more serious than one might think. Rejecting the heavenly manna was tantamount to spurning God's grace (cf. Jn 6:32–35, 48–51, 58).

**21:8–9** In response to the people's confession of sin (v. 7), God directed Moses to make an image of a snake and put it on a pole, so that anyone who had been bitten could look at it and live. (See the typological use of this incident in Jn 3:14–15).

**21:8** MAKE A SNAKE AND PUT IT UP ON A POLE – Israel had confessed its sin after a rebellion one other time in Numbers (14:40). But then they went out without the Lord's presence and were defeated (14:41-45). Their confession was shallow; they believed they could fulfill the promises of the Lord through their own efforts. This background of the earlier confession helps explain why the Lord does not simply get rid the serpents immediately. The bronze serpent by itself does not have the power to heal (as Israel mistakenly believed, 2 Kings 18:4). No, it is the serpent connected with the promise of the Lord that brings life.

**21:9** HE LIVED – This account is especially dear to people of the NT because Jesus pointed to it in John 3. Just as the Israelites were from the poison of the snakes when they looked in faith toward the bronze snake, so believers of all ages can look to Christ in faith and be saved from the spiritual poison of sin. (PBC)

## EPISTLE Ephesians 2:1-10

### *Made Alive in Christ*

**As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature <sup>a</sup> and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. <sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. <sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with**

**Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,<sup>7</sup> in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.<sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast.<sup>10</sup> For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

**2:1–10** In ch. 1 Paul wrote of the great purposes and plan of God, culminating in the universal headship of Christ (1:10), all of which is to be for “the praise of his glory” (1:14). He now proceeds to explain the steps by which God will accomplish his purposes, beginning with the salvation of individuals.

**2:1** A description of their past moral and spiritual condition, separated from the life of God. – Paul describes life before Christ as no life at all. Sin kills. It paralyzes us with a killing force. Sin kills the spirit and the will. What’s more, sin separates from the life God has to give. In this sense, more than in any other, life before Christ is a walking death. (LL)

The word dead is used as a metaphor to mean spiritual and moral corruption. Looking back, Gentile Christians recognize they were in the condition of spiritual and moral demise. All the deterioration which accompanies careless, willful sinning was present in their lives. Transgressions in the Greek mean the deliberate breaking of a known law. Sins in Greek means “missing the mark.” Both sins of commission and sins of omission involve one in spiritual death. (A)

Corpses can’t move. Dead people can’t do anything; they are totally unable to help themselves. Such was the spiritual plight in which the Gentile Ephesians had found themselves. If any were inclined to question Paul’s diagnosis regarding their spiritual bankruptcy, he urged them to take a look at their lives and actions. (PBC)

**2:2** USED TO LIVE – Imagine a person whose entire perspective on life had been shaped only by television programming. What would such a person’s morality be like? His sexual ethics? His attitude toward violence? The value he placed on life? How strongly would he desire to serve others? The world sets standards different from those of Christ. Life before Christ is lived by a set of standards that usually settle for the lowest common denominator – standards like, “What’s in it for me?” or “How much can I get away with?” or “It worked for them; why shouldn’t it work for me?” So a newspaper reporter observes Mother Teresa washing the sores of a leper and says to her, “I wouldn’t do that for all the money in the world.” And Mother Teresa responds, “Neither would I.” Two separate worlds with two distinct sets of standards collide in those statements. Before Christ, we blended into the world’s mediocre, self-focused values. After Christ, we adopted a new set of challenging standards, those given us by God. (LL)

The Ephesians not only lived among people who behave this way, but actually engaged in such a life. (A)

WAYS OF THIS WORLD – Two pressures produce the “dead” life. One is the outward pressures of society which invite the Christian to live sub-standard lives. The other is our own inward predisposition to evil which the Tempter exploits. (A)

This is the atmosphere of the spirit that now, and in this era, operates in the children of disobedience. (S)

*ruler.* Satan (cf. Jn 14:30, “prince”).

This refers to the supernatural forces of evil actively hostile to man's true welfare and to God's purpose for him. Such forces are mentioned in 1:21 and again in 6:11-12. (A)

*air.* Satan is no mere earthbound enemy (cf. 6:12).

He ranges not only in the material world but in the spiritual world as well. (LL)

*spirit.* Satan is a created, but not a human, being (cf. Job 1:6; Eze 28:15; see note on Isa 14:12–15).

He was created as an angel and has powers far transcending human might. He seeks especially to turn believers into "those who are disobedient," persons whom he controls and through whom he works his evil will. (LL)

**2:3** *All of us.* Jews and Gentiles.

GRATIFYING THE CRAVINGS – A few examples: Abortion, business corruption, cohabitation, homosexuality, political correctness (there is more than one truth), spiritual laxity among Christians. – The word Paul uses for cravings carries the idea of wanting that which is forbidden, seeking that which is clearly wrong. Before Christ, our glands speak louder than our brains or our conscience. We follow our appetites. Like Big Bellied Ben in the old nursery rhyme, we eat the church, we eat the steeple, we eat the town, we eat the people. Our insatiable desires take us to extremes – as when in ancient Rome they built vomitoria in homes so that the gorged could regurgitate and return and eat more. (LL)

The grosser and more animal propensities. A life of indulgence in whatever natural feelings may arise in us – be they right or wrong. (PC)

OF OUR SINFUL NATURE – Paul here writes of a fallen nature without God. It is our natural tendency as sinners to do as sinners to do the wrong, to lay ourselves wide open to temptation and sin. Jesus described sins coming "from within, out of men's hearts." He said, "All these (sins) come from the inside...(Mark 7:20-23). That warped inside of us is our sinful nature. (LL)

Romans 7:15-25 <sup>15</sup> I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. <sup>16</sup> And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup> As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. <sup>18</sup> I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. <sup>b</sup> For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. <sup>21</sup> So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. <sup>22</sup> For in my inner being I delight in God's law; <sup>23</sup> but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. <sup>24</sup> What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin"

*objects of wrath.* See Ro 1:18–20; 2:5; 9:22.

Life apart from Christ is life in the hands of an angry God. (LL)



God has built into the world a process of retribution against sin. People who live a life dominated by sin experience the inevitable retribution that goes with such a life – broken relationship, disease, personal dissolution. (A)

Paul paints a grim picture. All people are by nature spiritually dead, totally unable to change their condition. Not only are they unable to improve their lot, but they are the objects of an offended God's wrath. They can expect nothing but the harshest of punishment – and that for all eternity. (PBC)

**2:4 GREAT LOVE FOR US** – This is agape love. It speaks of a love and affection that is totally one-way. It all comes from God. (PBC)

Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

1 John 3:1 “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.”

**RICH IN MERCY** – *eleos* – For not other reason, God has rescued men and women from death and given them life. God's mercy is his overflowing active compassion, freely exercised, excluding all idea of merit on the part of the object. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 10, Part 2)

Psalm 103:17 “But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children—

Titus 3:5 “he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

**2:5-6 MADE US ALIVE (5) RAISED US UP (6) SEATED US** – The Greek verbs for all three of these actions of God are compounded with a preposition at the beginning of each one – *syn* – the word for with. The thought is that these are shared experiences – shared both with Christ and with other Christians. The experiences of Christ are repeated in the Christian – the reception of a new life, resurrection from the death caused by sin, and exaltation to the heavenly places! There is no such thing as an individual Christian! We believe for ourselves but we do not believe alone! (A)

Alive (vivification), raised (resurrection), and seated (enthronement). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 1, Part 2)

Romans 6:4 “We were therefore buried with him 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.”

**2:5** *made us alive with Christ*. This truth is expanded in Ro 6:1–10.

When we could not lift a finger to help ourselves, God through Word and sacrament worked faith in our hearts, creating life where formerly there had been none. (PBC)

**WHEN WE WERE DEAD** - Though sin is the abominable thing which he hates, loathsome to him in the last degree, he did not turn from us when we were immersed in it; nor did he wait till we began to move towards him; he began to influence us even when we were dead. . – Dead is

nekros is to be taken literally and be like a corpse. Transgression is *paraptomah* which means to live life filled with errors and constantly missing the mark set for us by God. Verses 1-3 describe this type of life. We are alive physically but spiritually are really walking corpses.

1 Timothy 5:6 “But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.”

Romans 5:6, “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.”

**2:6** GOD HAS RAISED US WITH CHRIST - *soonegiro* - To revive spiritually.

*heavenly realms.* See note on 1:3.

Verses 6 and 7 emphasize how our union with Christ assures us of our place in heaven. Just as Christ has ascended to sit at the right hand of God the Father, so we can be confident that our place “in the heavenly realms” is secure. (LL)

The Christian finds himself already an honored guest, and adopted member of the family of God in God’s presence. (A)

We are now heavenly minded. (S)

Took us out of and away from the tomb of our spiritual death, henceforth to live spiritually in newness of life. (Lenski) – *soongkathidzo* – To not only give someone a seat but to winningly invite them to sit with you and the company that surrounds you. We are now heavenly minded.

*in Christ Jesus.* Through our union with Christ.

This union with Christ, already providing a foretaste of our reward, displays the riches of God’s love. Christ is often called the first fruits of the resurrection. Here appears as the first fruits of the ascension. The grace of God doesn’t just save us from hell – it delivers us to heaven. (LL)

**2:7** *coming ages.* Cf. 1:21; probably refers to the future of eternal blessing with Christ.

*show.* Or “exhibit” or “prove.”

Imagine how at the turn of the century immigrant families sent one of their own on to America. Sometimes months later they would hear that their loved one had arrived and was doing everything possible for the rest of the family to follow. That loved one’s presence in the new country left those in the old country already sensing the blessings that were to be theirs. That is the dynamic at work here. Christ is in heaven, victorious after the living, dying, and rising. As sure as he is there and has done all that is necessary for us, we will follow. His grace, his love, in going before us, has made it possible. (LL)

God did not make us alive just to give us a small taste of heaven. He did so, “in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. (PBC)

INCOMPARABLE – upeballon – Riches that are so great that they surpass any hyperbole. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 1, Part 2)

There is nothing in our present range of experience that can compare with heaven, so great is the love and mercy of ur God, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. (PBC)

EXPRESSED IN HIS KINDNESS TO US – khraystotace – A useful goodness and gentleness that comes from an excellent moral character. In the manner of the blessing that comes to us as Jesus dealt with the woman that was caught in sin, with the thief on the cross, with Peter or with Saul.

**2:8** A major passage for understanding God’s grace, i.e., his kindness, unmerited favor and forgiving love.

IT IS BY GRACE – It is utter generosity, unselfish, spontaneous, recklessly prodigal generosity, which acts wholly out of loving concern for the other’s need, even if he is completely unworthy of the love and help thus offered him. (A)

*you have been saved.*† “Saved” has a wide range of meanings. It includes salvation from God’s wrath, which we all had incurred by original sin and our own sins. The tense of the verb (also in v. 5) suggests a completed action with emphasis on its present effect.

*through faith.*† See Ro 3:21–31 (and notes on that passage), which establishes the necessity of faith in Christ as the only way of being made right with God.

Grace is the “give” word; faith is the “receive” word. Faith itself is regarded by St Paul as a gift (Phil 1:20). The point of the verse is that the whole process is not something we do for ourselves; God does it for us. (A)

*not from yourselves.* No human effort can contribute to our salvation; it is the gift of God.

Corpses don’t resuscitate themselves! Our rescue, our life, comes as a gift from God. (LL)

The Greek literally says, “not from you.” – “You have not done this of your own strength.” (Brauer)

John 3:16 ““For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, <sup>f</sup> that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Romans 3:24 “and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

Romans 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in <sup>a</sup> Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Romans 8:32 “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?”

**2:9** *not by works.*† One cannot earn salvation by “observing the law” (Ro 3:20, 28). Such a legalistic approach to salvation is consistently condemned in Scripture.

The only way good works could save us with a perfect and just God is if our whole life were perfect. God cannot accept a 99 percent morally perfect life. He requires 100 percent perfection. (LL)

The New English Bible translates it “not a reward for work done.” (A)

*no one can boast.* No one can take credit for his or her salvation.

The idea behind the Greek is an attitude of self-congratulation and pride. (A)

Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,<sup>f</sup> that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Romans 3:23, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in<sup>a</sup> Christ Jesus our Lord.”

**2:10** *workmanship.* The Greek for this word sometimes has the connotation of a “work of art.”

The Greek word for “workman” is *poiema*, the same word from which we get our word “poem.” God continues to work in each of us in order to make us what he wants of us – and what God creates is always a thing of beauty! (LL)

*poyaymah* – To be the product of someone who has very lovingly crafted something. We say that a craftsman communicates with his work so God continues to do so with us.

CREATED IN CHRIST JESUS -*ktidzo* – To fabricate or form something. To create something out of nothing. A creating is meant, by virtue of which we are now in Christ Jesus.

Mark 16:15 “He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”

Romans 1:20 “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

2 Corinthians 5:17 “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”

Galatians 6:15 “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.”

TO DO GOOD WORKS – God has much work for us to do. Good works are a crucial aspect of the Christian life. Our good works, however, become an expression of thankfulness for all Christ has done for us, not an attempt to win heaven. (LL)

All of man's work is God's work through man. It embraces the whole conduct of a man in so far as he falls under the antithesis of good and evil.. and including the hidden motions of the will, whether in relation to God, to the world or to other men. (Kittel) –

With our new God-given spiritual life we are indeed able to respond to God's will. We are able, albeit imperfectly, to do what God wants. It is not that we have to, but rather that we want to do God's will. The good works that flow from faith are simply an opportunity to show our appreciation for all that God in Christ has done for us. It would be hard to improve on the apostle John's terse analysis: "We love (God) because he first loved us (1 John 4:19). But even the good deeds we do are not basis for boasting. They are really not our own doing; we're simply being given the opportunity to do the good things "which God prepared in advance for us to do." (PBC)

Good is agathos and means to do something that is of benefit to others. Works comes from ergon which means an act of labor. The sun has its purpose and so do we. What we are to do is connected to the gifts/talents and opportunities God gives us. Our walk in Christ is a walk in good works (little Christs).

Matthew 5:13 "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men."

Matthew 5:16 "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

2 Corinthians 5:15 "And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again."

Galatians 5:16 "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature."

Ephesians 5:2 "and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

*prepared in advance.* † Carries forward the theme of God's purpose and planning, seen in ch. 1. – All the ways of holiness and righteousness are God's design and preparation. We need not puzzle about and search for what may please God, he has long ago mapped out the entire course. They all spring from faith. (Lenski)

proetoymadzo – To fit into place ahead of time. We find them present and need only conduct our walk in them. Honor is due God alone for what we are and do as Christians.

1 Corinthians 12:11 "All these (gifts) are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines."

2 Timothy 1:9 “who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.”

GOSPEL  
John 3:14-21

**14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”**

**3:14** JUST AS MOSES LIFTED UP THE SNAKE IN THE DESERT – This is used to help Nicodemus link Christ with the Scripture he already knew. It also point to the fact that there is only way to be saved. The serpent is a type of the Son of Man; Christ is similar, but greater, in the flowing ways: (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 2)

- 1) The lifted-up serpent looked like a deadly serpent, but was without poison. The lifted-up Son of Man looked like a sinner, but was only in likeness of sinful flesh; He was crucified as a criminal, but without sin.
- 2) The bronze serpent was lifted up to make sport of the deadly serpents, as if it were a slain trophy. The Son was lifted up to make a public spectacle of the enemy, as it the defeated devil was on the cross.
- 3) God made the elevated bronze serpent the source of life. The elevated Son of Man is God’s source of eternal life.
- 4) Whoever looked up to the bronze snake was healed. They did not need to do any good works first, only behold the “savior” God provided, and God fulfilled His objective promise. Likewise, “everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life” (John 6:40). No good works are necessary. God fulfills His objective promise in Christ without any merit on our part.
- 5) All who looked to the serpent were healed. God’s promise was for the entire people. Similarly, but in a greater way, God’s salvation in Christ is for the entire world, Jew and Gentile alike.

*the Son of Man must be lifted up.* See notes on 12:31–32.

**3:15** *believes.* See note on 1:7.

The promise belongs to everyone who believes. It is universal. No one who believes is excluded. At the same time the promise belongs to each one who believes. It is personal. God knows our names, and each of us has eternal life. (PBC)

*eternal life.* An infinitely high quality of life in living fellowship with God—both now and forever.

Exa, “have” is present subjunctive, indicating that the believer has eternal life both now, in the midst of deadly snakes, and forever in heaven. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 2)

**3:16** *God so loved the world.* The great truth that motivated God’s plan of salvation (cf. 1Jn 4:9–10).

God values, cherishes, and esteems mankind on the basis of God’s own being; from eternity His is love (1 John 4:8). He loved the whole world, all people. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 2)

*world.* All people on earth—or perhaps all creation (see note on 1:9).

kosmos – This refers to everything in the world but in this case especially that portion of the population that is hostile to the God. This word is used 75 times in John.

*that he gave.* See Isa 9:6.

The Father actually gave up His Son to death, only to receive Him back in glory, fulfilling the typology of Abraham, a human father who also did not spare his only son and received him back alive. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 2)

God’s love brought results. He offered the ultimate sacrifice for the world He loved. (PBC)

*one and only Son.* See 1:14, 18; cf. Ge 22:2, 16; Ro 8:32. Although believers are also called “sons of God” (2Co 6:18; Rev 21:7), Jesus is uniquely God’s Son.

monogene - Sole or only born. – auios A child or son. In this case the son was not adopted like we are.

BELIEVES – pisteuo - To have faith in God. Found 90 times in John.

NOT PERISH – apollumi To be destroyed, in this case eternally. To die.

ETERNAL – Adjectives like perpetual, for ever, everlasting are used to describe eternal.

LIFE – Life like a lifetime.

**3:17** SEND SON – apostello The one who was set apart and sent specifically for this cause.

JUDGE – krino Someone who makes a decision and judges right from wrong. The trial in our case left to defend ourselves would result in being condemned, punished and sentenced to eternal damnation.

SAVE – The following adjectives say it well: Deliver, protect, heal, preserve or make whole.

The two in clauses show purpose from two different perspectives. The first, the active voice asserts that God’s purpose was not to condemn. In the second, John goes against the natural flow of language and switches to the passive sotha, “be saved,” to emphasize the Son as the

agent who does not carry out His saving work independently of the Father, but humbly serves the Father's purpose. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 2)

**3:18 believes ... does not believe.**† John is not speaking of momentary beliefs and doubts but of continuing, settled faith.

### "God So Loved the World" #73-28

Presented on The Lutheran Hour on March 26, 2006

By Rev. Michael Newman, Guest Speaker

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Text: John 3:14-21

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, for every person listening, let this be the time; let this be the day; let this be the hour; for encouragement, for hope, and for new life through Jesus our Savior. Amen.

The Bible reading for today is that very familiar statement of Jesus. It's from John 3:16. You may even be able to say it with me, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

I'll be honest with you. That verse surprises me. It says: "God so loved the world." Do you love the world? Now, I think I can say that I like the world. The sunrises and the sunsets are beautiful here in San Antonio where I live. I'm thankful for my wife and daughters. I enjoy reading a good book or going for a long run. Those are some great parts of life in this world.

But there's another side to all of this. I don't like the aches and pains when I run. I don't like the difficulty and discord that sometimes happen in family life. I don't like the frustration of traffic jams. I don't like when people are mean or hurtful. And those are minor dislikes compared to the heartbreak of this hurting world. One glance at the headlines can bring tears to your eyes as you see senseless death, rampant crime, and painful abuse. I don't love that part of this world.

What about you? Do you love your world? As you listen today you can probably think of some wonderful blessings that you treasure in this world, some great experiences, some loving people. But you also may be struggling. You don't love the loneliness that you're feeling. The health struggles that you're going through get you down. You lost your job and you wonder what you're going to do. The addiction in your life is destroying you and everyone around you. Or, life just hasn't turned out the way you thought it would. And you don't love that very much at all.

But Jesus told a man named Nicodemus in John 3:16, "God so loved the world." Nicodemus was just like you. He didn't love his world all that much. He was a religious leader who felt trapped in a helpless and hurt-filled life. He didn't know a way out. His friends weren't helping. So one night he snuck away to meet Jesus. Jesus was unlike anyone Nicodemus had met. This Jesus was doing miracles. He was teaching about new life instead of the old, humdrum life. Nicodemus knew he needed something different, so he went to Jesus.

And, do you know what Jesus did? He put something new into Nicodemus' life. To a life that was plagued by brokenness and sin Jesus said, "God so loved the world."

Friend, I want to tell you that Jesus puts something new into your life today. You may not love your world or be thrilled with your life, but God loves you deeply. And He comes to you today with the strength, the hope, the encouragement, and the new beginning that you need. He gives you something new. And that's powerful!

This was really driven home for me when I heard the true story about a young man named Johnny. He was a bagger at a grocery store. You know what I mean. He put people's groceries in their bags! Johnny the bagger was by no means in the upper tier of the organizational chart in the company. But he was included with all the other workers when the president of the grocery store chain invited everyone to a



vision and mission meeting for the company. Two world-renowned business consultants were meeting with all the workers to present the vision of effective customer service. They told the group, "Every encounter you have with a customer is a chance to make a difference. Your words and actions matter, so go make a difference."

Johnny was inspired by those words. His life mattered. He could make a difference. So as Johnny made his way home, he started to think about how he could make his encounters with customers more meaningful, how he could give them something that would make a difference in their lives. That's when he had an idea. When he got home, he wrote down a "thought for the day." It was a kind and helpful statement that he thought would bring some cheer to the people in the grocery store line. His dad helped him type the thought for the day into the computer, six to a page. Then Johnny printed out 50 pages-enough to make 300 "thoughts for the day." He cut them into strips of paper and signed each one of them personally. Then he brought them to work. Every time he bagged someone's groceries, he put his thought for the day into the last bag. When the customer was getting ready to leave the store, Johnny would smile and say, "I put something extra in bag for you. I hope it helps you have a nice day."

An amazing thing happened at the store. Customers loved what Johnny was putting into the bag. Soon the line at Johnny's checkout was stretching back into the frozen food aisle. People who normally shopped once a week were coming into the store every day. When managers tried to usher people to shorter lines, they refused to go. "We want Johnny's thought for the day," they said.

Not long after that, managers were reporting that the culture of the store was changing. When the floral department had a broken flower or unused corsage the workers would usually throw the flowers away. But now they searched the store for an older woman or little girl and, with a smile and greeting, presented the flower to her. Everything was changing-all because one person decided to put a blessing in people's bags.

As you live your life, a lot gets put into your bag. Some of it is good, some not so good. You've got some heavy items to carry in your life. Some of what you've got is balanced precariously. You're not in control. It feels like everything can come tumbling out at any moment. Every day you pick up more items, you get loaded down, you bear the burden of brokenness and sin. But then came Jesus. And he put something into your grocery bag-something different, something that brings blessing.

You heard that happen in John chapter three. Nicodemus was loaded down with a life that he didn't love. And Jesus said to him, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." You see, Johnny isn't the only bagger. Jesus is a bagger, too. And this was Jesus the bagger in action. He brought blessing to a broken heart. He brought the news of forgiveness to a hopeless soul. He brought the joy of the resurrection to a worn out life. Jesus the bagger put something new into Nicodemus' bag.

Do you realize that's what Jesus gives you today? It's what Jesus is all about! All you have to do is read about Jesus' life in the first four books of the New Testament-Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. You'll see Jesus the bagger in action! You'll see lines of people that would have stretched way past the frozen food aisle as so many came to receive the life Jesus gave. There was healing, the forgiveness of sins, words of consolation, words of teaching and correction. Jesus always puts something good into people's bags.

That's what He does for you today. You may not love your world, but your Savior Jesus loves you! And He comes to you where you're at and puts blessing into your bag. It's not just a thought for the day. It's Himself. Jesus puts Himself into your bag! He bled and died on the cross to be in your life with the forgiveness of your sins. He rose up from the grave to be in your bag, to be the help and strength you need in your life every day! The presence of Christ Jesus who loves you gets poured into your life through baptism and communion. His Word is the blessing of new life and hope in your bag.

Do you need some strength? Psalm 46 verse 1 says, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." I wonder if that is exactly what you need in your bag today.

Or, you may need forgiveness. 2 Corinthians 5 verse 17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

Perhaps you're searching for God's promise in your life. The Bible says in Jeremiah 29 verse 11, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." You may have felt like your life was a dead-end when you tuned in today, but now you're given God's promise of plans for you. Blessing has been added to your bag.

Do you need a clear invitation from Jesus today? Jesus said in Matthew chapter 11 verse 28, "Come to Me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." I wonder if this is the day that Jesus is calling you to receive His rest.

You may be saying to yourself, "I just heard exactly what I needed." Or you may be thinking, "My wife needs that verse." Or, "I have a friend who needs to hear those words." Well, share the blessing. Pass it along.

You see my point, don't you? Johnny and Jesus aren't the only baggers. You are, too. Every day you're a bagger. Every day you know that because Jesus put new life in your bag, you've got something to put into the bags of the people in your life. You can share the news that, in the midst of a difficult life, "God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

So, how are you doing as a bagger? What are you putting into the lives of the people your "line"? What about your actions? Your caring actions, living a life of integrity, being kind and truthful and doing the right thing will bring blessing to the people in your life. Your actions can put blessing in people's bags.

Perhaps being a bagger means being a friend. Who needs you to listen to them? Who needs you to show some genuine care? When you really care about someone, God will give you opportunities to put blessing in their bag. It may be a word of encouragement. It may be a prayer. It may be a word of correction and accountability. But it's putting blessing in people's bags.

You may even be someone who wants to reach out in an active way. It may be through a conversation with someone in your life. You may send an e-mail or written note to someone you care about. Maybe you make a phone call or send a text message. But there are times when the Holy Spirit leads you to speak up, to actively bring the message of Jesus to someone, to put the blessing of God in a person's bag.

Let me tell you about a friend of mine named Hilda. Hilda was a long time listener to The Lutheran Hour. She was even the niece of the very first Lutheran Hour speaker, Dr. Walter Maier! Hilda would have been 101-years-old this year. I'll tell you honestly, in her later years her world wasn't that loveable. Her dear husband passed away. Because of declining health, she had to move out of her beautiful home and away from her family. Hilda took up residence in a nursing home-something she never imagined would happen in her life. She was confined to a wheel chair and depended on others to get through the day. But in the midst of all of that, Hilda looked me in the eye and said to me, "I'm happier than I've ever been in my life. I've never felt closer to Jesus than now." Hilda was a shining light in that nursing home. She was a bagger! Every resident, guest, and worker who came into her room received a joyful greeting, a word of encouragement, and a sincere expression of the love of Jesus. Hilda's life had taken so many difficult turns, but she knew that God so loved her and God so loved the world! She wanted to put that Good News, that hope and new life, into people's bags.

I want to ask you: How's your bagging going? What are you putting into people's bags? Do you see that God has new life and new purpose for you today?

Nicodemus left after that evening talk with Jesus. He appears again in John chapter seven-defending Jesus. We see Nicodemus again in John chapter 19, using his own resources to help with Jesus' burial. Nicodemus' world was changed. He had blessing in his bag.

I hope and pray that you've received the blessing of Jesus Christ in your bag today; that in the midst of life which can be so difficult, you've been blessed with the surprising but wonderful news that God so loved the world through Jesus Christ! In addition to that encouragement, do you know what else I hope and pray? That you'll start fresh today and be a bagger!

Let's pray: Dear Jesus, our Savior and Friend. Thank you for being the blessing in our bag. Thank you for

the forgiveness of our sins, for hope and strength each day, and for life everlasting. Use us now as baggers to bring your blessing of love and new life to the world. Amen

### **"Do More - Try Harder" #76-28**

Presented on The Lutheran Hour on March 22, 2009

By Rev. Dr. Ken Klaus, Speaker of The Lutheran Hour

(Q&A Topic: What does it mean to fear and love God?)

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Text: Ephesians 2:8-9

Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! The resurrection of the Redeemer is God's great gift of grace which offers forgiveness to those who have committed big sins, as well as small. The Savior's victory over death, the devil, and the evil within us unites all who believe in a great procession which has heaven as its ultimate destination. God grant lost humanity hears and believes Jesus' personal invitation to "Come, follow Me." Amen.

The opening words of this Lutheran Hour message are not mine. They are quoted from the writings of a Lutheran Chaplain. I will tell you more of his incredibly interesting story directly. For now, I will let him speak. This is what he wrote: "Nearly 2,000 years ago, three crosses were erected at Golgotha. In the midst hung Jesus Christ crucified, the Savior of the world. On either side were crucified two malefactors. One of them in the last moments of his sinful life repented and appealed for pardon, and was transported into paradise. The other died unsaved and passed into eternity. The cross is no longer there, but the value and the preciousness of the (Christ's) perfect work of redemption remain unchanged. Salvation in Christ is still the same for all (seeking) souls as it was in that day. The attitude to the cross decides the eternal destiny. Faith in Jesus and His shed blood gives evidence of sins forgiven. God's merciful hand saves from the place of eternal torment -- those whose faith is in Christ." That ends the quote.

Those words, written more than half-a-century ago, come from the pen of Reverend H.F. Gerecke, Lutheran chaplain to the high Nazi criminals who were being tried at Nurnberg. Chaplain Gerecke had gone on active service in 1943 and for 14 months ministered to the war's sick and wounded. On July 15 he came to Germany and was asked to serve the most infamous of the surviving Nazi leaders. Although he was a man of God, Chaplain Gerecke was still a man. He confessed his concerns before he met with them. He said, "Must I greet these men who (have) had bought such unspeakable suffering on the world, and the cause of the sacrifice of so many millions of lives? My two only sons were also victims of their misdeeds. How should I comport myself before such men so that they would be willing to receive God's word?"

In truth, much of the world would have said these men deserved no mercy, no consideration, no compassion, and certainly no chaplain of the Christ. To those who had lost homes, years, sons and daughters there was no punishment, no penalty, no pain that would have been too harsh for the members of the chaplain's caged congregation. More than a half-century later, their names are still known: there was Hermann Goering, the leader of Germany's Luftwaffe, Field Marshal Keitel who had helped plan the war's blitzkrieg; deceitful Foreign Minister Von Ribbentrop, Grand Admiral Raeder who had rebuilt the German Navy, and Grand Admiral Donitz who had created and directed the German U-boat fleet. In the fellowship was Hitler's architect and man-in-charge of the home front, Albert Speer; Wilhelm Frick who controlled Germany's concentration camps, the president of the Reichsbank, Walther Funk; Balder Von Schirach the man who had directed the indoctrination of an entire generation of Hitler Youth; and Fritz Sauckel who had organized the enslavement of millions.

After meeting this rogue's gallery, the chaplain remembered: "The night I passed in prayer, asking God to give me a message for them. These men must hear something of the Savior who suffered and died (also) on the cross for them." Turning to Scripture, the chaplain found God's direction in the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In the months which followed, the world heard words of public condemnation and accusation, countered by allegations of innocence. Privately, the pastor kept preaching. In brief worship services, with organ accompaniment provided by an ex-SS Lieutenant Colonel, Chaplain Gerecke told these men of war how Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, had sacrificed Himself for the salvation of

sinners, all sinners. On October 1, 1946, all that could be said at the trials had been said and verdicts were handed down. For a few of those in the docket there was acquittal; others were sentenced to years, even life, in prison. The worst of the Nazis were told they must die to pay for their considerable crimes against civilization. On October 16, the world held its breath as those who were condemned mounted the steps of their gallows; it listened, and some rejoiced as the guilty were hung.

But Chaplain Gerecke saw something different. During the months of the trial the chaplain had noted the Holy Spirit acting in the lives of some, although not all, of these men. In the presence of death, having lost all things material, including their lives, some came to rely on the promises of God made to lost sinners. Keitel was moved by the Scriptures which spoke of the redeeming power of the blood of Jesus; Sauckel kept praying, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner." The chaplain overheard Von Ribbentrop ask his wife to bring up their children in the fear of the Lord, and Sauckel encouraged his spouse to take their numerous little ones to the shadow of the Cross of Jesus. Before he died, Frick assured the chaplain that in their simple services he had met Jesus and believed in the cleansing blood of the Lamb.

Now, there is a reason why I have invested so much time telling the story of a World War II chaplain and his Nazi charges. It is not to praise the man; nor to condemn or applaud the court's verdict. I share this story so you may know that what St. Paul wrote to the Christians of Ephesus is true: "By grace we are saved through faith in Jesus. We are saved because of God's undeserved Gift of His Son and not by anything we can do." I shared this story because I want you to know: if the Lord can reach into the hearts of Nazi war criminals; if He can forgive the multitude of their misdeeds and rescue and redeem them from eternal death and damnation, He most certainly can do the same for you and me.

Hearing those words, I would be surprised if a great many of you haven't straightened up, done a double take at what you think you just heard on the radio and demand to know: "Pastor, are you comparing me to a war criminal? Because if you are, you're very much mistaken. I haven't murdered anyone; I haven't enslaved anyone; I am not guilty of genocide; I have not sentenced anyone unfairly; I haven't stolen art treasures; I have never caused a war which took the lives of millions; I have never committed any of the terrible atrocities of which these men were found guilty. And as long as we're at it, my name hasn't appeared on the evening news. I don't run a meth lab; I'm not a 'person of interest' in a drive-by shooting; I'm not stealing the life savings of the elderly; I haven't run my company into the ground; or had my computer confiscated by the authorities because of child pornography. On the contrary, I've tried, and think I've succeeded, in living a pretty good life. Ask my spouse, my neighbors, my family. I might not be perfect, but I try to be a good person, a good citizen, a good guy or gal. I don't drink too much, swear too much, party too much, gamble too much, mess around too much. No, if you think I should be listed in the same category as a Nazi war criminal, or one of those Eyewitness News criminals, Pastor, you'd better rethink yourself. Frankly, I'm offended at your implication."

If that's what you're feeling, you're thinking, you're saying, please, be calm and hear me out as I say: "Well, I've got some good news and I've got some bad news." First, the good news: I don't think that you are, in human terms as bad as the criminals we've been talking about. I believe you're not a war criminal or any other kind of criminal. I believe you're not such a bad person. Indeed, you're probably a better person than I am. That's the good news. Now, here's the bad news: when it comes to your eternal salvation, the opinion of Ken Klaus, Lutheran Hour Speaker, isn't worth a hill of beans. When it comes to the verdict of whether you spend eternity in heaven or hell, it is the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier which will count for everything. The bad news is, when the perfect God, the God Who can't stand sin in any amount, in any form, in any way takes a look at you, at me, just as we are... well, quite frankly, we don't look so good.

Back when I was in the parish, when our young people made profession of their faith, it was customary to have a service of "Confirmation." That means these young people confirmed they believed in the fundamentals of faith. They believed God had made them, had given them all they had and would ever be; that God's Son, the Savior, had won their salvation not with silver or gold, but with His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death; they believed the Holy Spirit had, through the power of the Gospel, called them to faith and would keep them there. Now, at this special church service it was customary for the young people to wear white robes -- a symbol that their sins had been covered and they

had been washed clean, made white, by the Savior's sacrifice.

As instructed, the children took their robes home and gave them to their mothers. In the days before permanent press, or disposable robes, whatever signal that sends, the moms were asked to wash, starch, and iron those white robes so everybody would look perfect on Confirmation Sunday. On that special day the children showed up with their white robes in tow. They put them on and were given instructions, both explicit and implicit, that for the next few minutes, at least until pictures could be taken, they should stay clean. They were not to lean up against anything, brush up against anything, come near to anything, think about anything that would dirty their robes. With more than 25 years in the parish, can I tell you what happened? I don't have to tell you, do I? You know.

In less than 30 seconds one, or two, or three of those young people would manage to mess up their robes. They tried to be good. They tried to stay clean. They really did. But, somehow, almost by magic or through magnetism, a spot, a blotch, a smudge, a mark would appear on the robe -- a perfectly clean, white robe with an imperfection. Do you know how that looks? I can tell you how it looked to those moms who had so much time and sweat equity invested in making their young boy or girl look good. When those moms looked at their children the only thing they could see was a stain. They didn't see the 99.9% of the robe which remained white. They...just...saw...the...spot. Those moms zeroed in on that spot and, for each of them the robe had become filthy, a mess. More than one of those moms asked, "Why don't you play in a mud puddle or wallow in a pig sty? You wouldn't look any worse." Those moms didn't mean that. Well, most of them didn't. At any rate, what I'm saying is, for those moms the robes were white or they were not white. There was no in between.

Now you and I both know you're not a war criminal or any kind of criminal. In the eyes of humankind you are nowhere near as bad as they are. But, once again, I need to say: what humanity thinks isn't important and what God thinks is all important. And when God looks at us, He doesn't see us as being pretty good, or better than most. God sees us for what we are: sinners. We are sinners and He is disappointed. He had originally made humankind to be like Him, perfect, without any smudges of sin, or touch of transgression. But when humanity disobeyed, disregarded, and denied Him, the fabric of our souls was besmirched and befouled. When God looks at the best of us and the worst of us, He sees us as sinners. Sinners who can no more fix ourselves up than the average eighth grade boy can wash, starch, and iron his Confirmation robe.

Work as hard as you want, you can't make yourself good enough; perfect enough, to get into heaven. St. Paul is clear. You're not getting into heaven by anything you can do. God's not letting you into heaven because you were pretty good, because pretty good isn't near perfect enough. You can spend every Christmas season dressing up as Santa and, out of your own pocket, giving toys to needy tots; you can help a billion little old ladies across the street, but that's not going to make your soul as white as it needs to be. You're not getting into heaven by what you do, nor will you make it because of what someone else has done. You can't say, "My grandfather founded a church; my father was a missionary, my wife was a saint on earth. Because of them I ought to get past those pearly gates." Folks, there aren't many things we have to do alone in this world, but dying and being judged is one of them. On the day you die, it's not going to make any difference if you're personal friends with the President or are on the A-list of every Hollywood celebrity there has ever been. On the day you breathe your last, you won't get into heaven on the coattails of anybody.

Wait a minute, that's not exactly true. The truth is there is One Person Who can help you -- One and Only One Individual who can give a free pass to the big sinners, the little sinners, all the sinners of this world. There is One Person who can make souls white enough so even the justly critical eye of our Divine Judge will find neither fault nor flaw nor failing. That Person whom you need; whom you must have is Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God. Jesus is the Grace whom St. Paul talked about. Jesus is the Gift whose life, suffering, death, and resurrection saves. With Him, no sin can stain or besmirch; without Him, every sin is enough to condemn. With Him is life eternal; without Him is condemnation.

Long ago I heard a story, and it is a story, about a man who was standing outside the door to heaven. As he stood there, up the narrow path came a proud procession, marching, singing, waving bright banners of praise. Without stopping, they passed on and went into heaven. Moved by curiosity, through the gate, the

man called to an angel, "Who were those folks?" The angel replied, "They are the prophets who are on their way to see the Lord." Hearing that, the man thought to himself, "Well, I'm not a prophet, so I can't go in like them." It didn't take but a few moments before another group approached. Also wearing white robes, they marched, no, it was more like, they danced through the gates of heaven. From inside paradise came the peal of bells and great shouts of welcome. The man, unable to hear what the crowds were saying asked the angel, "And who were those guys?" The angel replied, "Those? Those are the Lord's Apostles and they are being welcomed by the martyrs who are already here."

The man, knowing he was neither prophet, apostle, nor martyr, was wondering if he would ever find a group to which he belonged, a group with whom he might enter heaven, which would let him stand in the presence of God. No sooner had that thought been formed, when a sound, a thunderous, chest-shaking sound forced him to turn. Another group, a greater group, a giant group, a countless throng of souls could be seen coming up the path. Actually, this crowd couldn't be seen, not completely, not totally, for this group overflowed the path and stretched to the horizon where the souls who were coming could be seen only as small specs, all swarming, and singing, and praising.

The man turned to ask the angel who these people were, but before he could say anything, the angel anticipated his question and remarked: "These, like the others you have seen, are sinners who have acknowledged their transgressions, their helplessness, and have been brought to faith in the Savior and the sacrifice He made for them with His life and upon the cross. They have seen the risen Lord conquer the grave and, in victory, He has brought them here just as He promised." Hearing that, the man turned and took another look. And although he was not sure how he knew them, he was able to recognize some. There was short Zacchaeus, and the centurion who had stood by Jesus' cross. There was the daughter of Jairus, and blind Bartimaeus who seemed to have 20-20 vision. Along with these there were other faces, more familiar faces: his Sunday school teacher; some pastors he had known, his Christian auto-mechanic, his garbage collector, the young boy who delivered his paper. And from his history books, he even recognized the faces of some executed Nazi war criminals that were walking in step with a man wearing a U.S. army chaplain's uniform. Most amazing, all these faces seemed changed, transformed. These were those who had been forgiven by grace through faith. And that man, like anyone who will be in heaven, said to himself: "I am one of these." And as Jesus passed by Him, He nodded to the man and said, "Come."

Now I cannot speak for the veracity of that story. It is, after all, a story. But I can, without hesitation say to you, a brother or sister sinner, that the Savior has come into this world to seek and save us. So we might be forgiven, He lived His entire life without failing or fumble; so we might be freed from punishment He was persecuted; so we might live with Him, He died. Now, a risen Lord, a living Lord Jesus comes to you in your sin and says, "By grace you are saved. I am the Gift Your Father gives." To you, this day the Savior nods and says, "Come." And if you need to know more of the Savior's invitation, please, call us at The Lutheran Hour. Amen