

## **“Generals, rise!” Mark 9:38-50**

**John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.**

**“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

We have received this incredible gift of our God. He has been so gracious to us. He not only was actively involved in creating and forming each one of us, He not only provides richly and abundantly for all our daily needs, He has done so much more.

When we were still dead in our sins, the Kingdom of God broke into our world, the Word of God awoken us from this sleep of death, the Spirit Creator made home with us and in the midst of eternal darkness He created a new life in us.

You were chosen, called, enlightened, you were brought in this wonderful fellowship with the Triune God and through His Spirit indwelling in you, you are also united in the most intimate way with all God’s people, from every nation and all peoples and tribes and languages. This is the gift that Jesus has brought you.

But we have a problem. And Jesus helps us to realise the seriousness of this problem as He today speaks to us in His Gospel message. Part of the problem is that we really struggle to comprehend the greatness and the preciousness of this gift.

We fail to appreciate it, but what is much more dangerous – we often tend to take it for granted, as if God owes it to us, not realizing that every day and every moment we need to be mindful about guarding and protecting this gift of faith.

There is one word that describes our problem. Can you guess what it is? Yes, sin. It is our sinful condition. And most of the time we seem to be blissfully ignorant about its destructive power. Remember the Augsburg Confession?

The foundation document of Lutheran Church, our foundational document as well. As the first and the most important teaching it mentions Biblical revelation of the Triune God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And what is the next one?

That's right, it is the teaching on sin. On our sinful condition. I guess it may not be our favourite teaching, but to be aware of this our condition and what it means practically is absolutely essential for us as Christians.

Whenever I need to prepare to preach or teach about the reality of sin, there is this one book where I usually go – “The Quest for Holiness” – and there is this one chapter which I usually reread. That is the best source that I have in my library.

I have read that book and especially that chapter numerous times, and every time I do it, it cuts me to the heart. Why? Because it awakens me to realize how much I keep failing in both, in my own Christian life and my preaching and teaching.

I still exist by God's grace alone. I would like to share with you today some of the insights from that book. Do you remember the third question that we are asked in our Confession? “Do you intend with the help of the Holy Spirit to live as in God's presence, and to strive daily to lead a holy life, even as Christ has made you holy?” How do we respond? “Yes, I do.”

How do you understand it? What does this mean that we intend to strive to lead a holy life? How do you do that? What does this striving look like in your life? Think about it! This is important. For even Christians are often tempted to embrace a very dangerous attitude to our new lives as redeemed children of God.

You may have heard these, or, perhaps, you may have even said something along these lines yourself. “I know that God forgives me, I don't need to worry about it. We can't be perfect anyway, there is no point trying. We are redeemed and forgiven, so we don't need to worry about sinning anymore.” Sounds familiar?

I suspect that Jesus has rather different take on this issue: “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell.

If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’” What do you think?

“O, Jesus exaggerates, He uses figurative language, He doesn't really mean it.” On one level, that is true. Because these measures wouldn't help. If you tear out one eye the other will probably be sinning twice as intensely. But Jesus doesn't exaggerate anything as He tries to illustrate the seriousness of our sin and the need to resist it.

How can we picture our situation? Here is one way. As two countries at war. The war is being waged on numerous fronts. There are costly wins in some of the battles, there are painful losses in others. Some territories are regained, and others are lost.

All of this is happening in each one of us. Our sinful nature vs our new self. We all are generals in this war. To succeed we need to be aware of the situation, we need to know where there are weaknesses, which fortress is likely to fall under pressure.

We can't lose our vigilance. That leads to defeat, and every defeat weakens us. Every time we fall in this battle, we get up weaker than before. The scary thing is that this war never ceases, it never stops, there is no truce with this enemy.

Not in this life. We may want to take just a little break, just for a while to stop worrying about it. We can't. "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." (1 Pet 5:8)

"Hey, pastor, are you trying to scare us? It can't be that bad." The thing is that sin appears to be harmless. "What a big deal if I do this or that? What a big deal if I was rude to that person? They deserved it anyway. What a big deal if I didn't ask for forgiveness? After while they will forget about it.

What a big deal if I missed a few services? What a big deal if I watch some porn? What a big deal if I gossip a little bit? What a big deal if I forget to hear and read the Word of God? What a big deal if I lie when I need to save my reputation. So that I don't look bad. Everyone does those things. We all are fallen human beings, right?

All of these seemingly small things are of huge significance for our spiritual health. They are especially dangerous for us, Christians. Why? Because the Word of God has enlightened us and we are able to recognize what is God's will and what is not.

The Holy Spirit in us helps with that. If recognizing sin, we wilfully choose not to resist it, it is like opening the gates and letting the enemy in. Such attitude has far greater consequences for us, Christians. When someone is dead, they don't need to worry about catching any sickness, they can't harm them anymore.

That is those who are alive that need to worry. We were dead, but now we are made alive, not to commit spiritual suicide, but to guard and to care for the gift of our God-given new life. Wilfully engaging anything that we know to be sinful is like saying to the enemy: "What will you give me, if I betray Jesus? How will you reward me?"

Any sin that we choose to embrace and continue in, it is like a little hole in a boat. "What a big deal! It is just one little hole, there is no reason to worry about it." What will happen if there is just one little hole in our boat and we choose not to close it?

Yes, the boat of our salvation will sink. Sin is so deceptive, it tends to appear so innocent and powerless, but it has this scary power to blind us, to blind our understanding, it darkens what the Word of God enlightened.

It hardens our hearts, and it has its own power of gravity. If we sin wilfully, we suddenly can't see anymore what is wrong with what we have done, and we can't see anymore, where the sinful actions are leading us.

And because we chose to silence the voice of the Holy Spirit, we harden our hearts. With every such choice they become harder and harder, and the power of gravity drags us down as things spiral out of control.

One of the most vivid examples is the king David and his sin with Bathsheba. It all began by lustful look. What a big deal. But that kindled the passion. "Bring her to me!" Here she is. Let's sleep with her! Done. What a big deal! Many do that.

But then, pregnancy. He needed to save his reputation. Let's lie and deceive. But that didn't really help. Fine, let's murder the man which can bring him dishonour. It all begun so innocently. One sin... lust seeing that beautiful young woman.

It ended with adultery, lying, scheming, involving others, murder. With terrible consequences for David's own household, unrest and rebellion in his kingdom, and so on and on. One little sin... a lustful look at Bathsheba. What a bit deal?

But we don't even need to look at the king David. We all know numerous people who used to belong to the body of Christ, but then... little by little. One seemingly harmless sin, then another... and they are not among God's people anymore. Such hesitance to resist our sin, such wilful continuation in our beloved secret sins, it mocks and despises Jesus' sufferings and death. It makes fun of Jesus' cross.

But it is Jesus' cross, where the abundant grace of God flows from. The Triune God not only breathed His life-giving Holy Spirit in us, He continues to be with us every moment of our lives. His Spirit speaks to us every time we need to choose between sin and righteousness. He gently warns us.

His angels stand in our way, when we make wrong turns. He accompanies us on this life long journey of countless spiritual defeats and recoveries. Every defeat is us abandoning our God, and every recovery is our God sticking with us no matter what.

He provides for us weapons for our spiritual battle. The Absolution is one of them. Especially private confession and Absolution. As one of Lutheran theologians famously said: "General repentance is the death of repentance." What he meant was that unless we confess real sins and ask for help in real struggles, our confession and the following Absolution are quite harmless to our sins.

We need to strive to lead a holy life; to pay special attention to those sins which we find particularly sweet and enjoyable, we need to strive to resist them. Because, remember: “A little grain of sand can injure the sight. A little leak in the ship may sink it. A broken screw may endanger the operation of the whole machine. One seemingly harmless sin can grow and destroy our faith.”

More from that book: “Whoever is not willing to separate themselves from sin in God’s service will be separated by sin from God’s service. Whoever will not be illuminated by God’s Word will be beclouded by evil.

If the Christian conscience is not refined, it will not remain as it is, it will be hardened through the lack of progress. What is given as undeserved gift will be deservedly lost.” And our Dr Luther: “Whoever begins to believe, but does not increase and grow, finally loses his grace.” That’s it...

On the other hand, the one who strives to lead a holy life will “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might” (Eph 6:10). This is what our Christian life is like, “the old Adam in us should, by daily repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and a new man daily come forth and arise.”

Our Baptism is the source of our strength and new life, this our new identity as children of God the Father and siblings of Jesus Christ. And the Spirit of God that comes to us with the Word of God, and the Holy Sacrament that purifies us from all our sins and clothes us with God’s holiness.

When we seriously engage in this battle, this is when we really learn to love Jesus. There is nothing like the comradely on the battle field when your survival depends of the faithfulness of your friend. If he fails you, you die.

And what a friend we have in Jesus! He is with us in this battle. He helps us to grow stronger. He is first to run to us when we are in danger. He graciously forgives when we fail Him, He gently helps us to stand up when we fall.

When we are serious about this battle, that is when we learn to trust Him and to depend on Him. For without Him we can do nothing. That is when we learn to appreciate His grace and when our love of Jesus becomes real.

Then we grow in true faith, in this confidence that whatever dangers or temptation you may be facing, as long as Jesus is on your side, “you will finish the race, you will keep the faith,” and you will “receive the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to you on that day, and not only to you but also to all who have loved his appearing.” (2 Tim 4:7-8)

Rise, fellow-generals! Rise for the battle for your reward is already waiting you.

Amen.