

FOR THE

# LIFE OF THE WORLD

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## FEATURES

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### 4 Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins - by Rev. Dr. Jonathan F. Grothe President, Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

The central question is, "Who is Jesus? Is He the son of Joseph the carpenter or the Messiah onto whom the Lord's spirit has been poured to proclaim release to the captives?" (Luke 4:16-22). Scribes, Pharisees and the crowds of Jesus' day and of all times are confronted with the proclamation—He is God incarnate and He brings the forgiveness of sins to earth.

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# Is there a prerequisite to

**I**s there any prerequisite which must be met before seeking forgiveness from the Lord or one's neighbor? An immediate response comes to mind: a person ought truly to be sorry before asking forgiveness. That is, in fact, the first of a three-part formula proposed by the Roman Church centuries ago: contrition of the heart, confession of the mouth, and a subsequent demonstration of one's effectual sincerity of good works (contritio cordis, confessio oralis, satisfactio operis).

**Sin hates to be exposed. It often goes to work when nobody is looking. It then conceals itself in the shadows of lies and half-truths. It attempts to burrow into the depths of the soul by whatever means possible, hoping—and even praying—that time will pass, that it won't go any further and that no one will notice.**

Contrition as a prerequisite to asking for forgiveness appeals to common sense. We are, however, all too familiar with the kind of contrition and confession coerced from children in the wake of their misbehavior: "Now what do you say?" The resultant, "I'm sorry," is often less than convincing. It is met with an "I forgive you" which anticipates revisiting the scenario in the not too distant future. This forgiveness model falls apart if the heart is not sufficiently sorry for its transgressions.

So, if true heartfelt contrition is a pre-

requisite for forgiveness, we are then left wanting for some standard by which this condition can be measured and met. "Are you really sorry for what you have done? If not, you better not come around here asking forgiveness until you are."

Have we not learned that when one begins with a term like prerequisite as a prelude to talking about forgiveness, the answer to the question is fatally predisposed? We might fare better: and expose other stumbling blocks: if we initiate our investigation from a different starting point.

Sin hates to be exposed. It often goes to work when nobody is looking. It then conceals itself in the shadows of lies and half-truths. It attempts to burrow into the depths of the soul by whatever means possible, hoping—and even praying—that time will pass, that it won't go any further and that no one will notice.

It is no wonder, then, that sinners like ourselves might dread the thought of actually telling someone our deepest, darkest secrets—especially if that "someone" is the pastor of all people. Wouldn't most of us like the pastor to think well of us, to praise us for being "good Christians"? Why in the world, then, would we ever tell the pastor those things which reveal our greedy longings, deep-seated anger, embarrassing weaknesses or even perverted thoughts? Could the pastor ever think well of us if he knew what we were really like—if he knew the skeletons in our closet, the sins of our youth or the indiscretions of the recent past?

But what a blessing and a comfort it would be if we had pastors to whom we could confess our sins, someone who knows that Jesus "did not come to call the



# receive forgiveness?

**Rev. Joel Brondos**  
**Headmaster, Zion Academy**  
**Fort Wayne, Ind.**

righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matthew 9:12-13)! What if we could spill our guts with the sin festering therein (Psalm 32:3-4) and have one who in the stead and by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ speak to us words of forgiveness, life and salvation?

The Rev. Charles Evanson, pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, IN, has probably on more than one occasion related that, "There was a time when people didn't particularly like their priests, but they trusted them with their lives: and their confessions. Today, people like their pastors but they do not trust him any farther than they could throw him." What a sad commentary. We ought to realize that it really isn't all that important whether or not we like our pastors, whether they are friendly, sociable, good-looking or well-spoken. None of these attributes will do us one bit of good when we are confronted with the guilt of our sin before a holy God.

We don't need pastors who merely "affirm" us or just pat us on the back and say, "You are really a wonderful person! Just follow the dreams of your heart!" We don't need pastors who rewrite church constitutions as if they were corporate executives whose primary responsibility is to organize the church more effectively. What we really need both now and at the hour of our death are pastors who speak the very words of God to us, who don't merely attempt to assure us, but who as called and ordained servants of the Word speak actual forgiveness, peace and hope into our ears and hearts in the name of Christ.

This is what the people of a little town called Neuendettlesau received from their pastor, Wilhelm Loehe, years ago. He had to ask permission from church officials to have the practice of confession and absolution reinstated when it had been all but lost. Reluctantly, permission was granted. Thankfully so, because this little parish experienced tremendous growth as the direct result of the Lord's blessings and benefits bestowed through the reintroduction of individual confession and absolution. The mission work supported by the

people who lived joyfully in this absolution started and supported congregations, schools and seminaries around the world like those in Fort Wayne, IN.

If we today have pastors who eschew private confession and absolution as they did in Loehe's time, we need not be deterred. As Luther says, we ought to demand that our pastors hear our confession and pronounce Christ's absolution thereby exchanging the burden of our sins with forgiveness, life and salvation. That is, after all, the proper work of our pastors.

The kind of people who will demand this from their pastors are not those who have met some prerequisite, some measure of sorrow which has been critically scrutinized. They simply pour out their sin. They want to be rid of their sin. They want to be

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rid of their sin in the worst way. They want to be freed from the stinking "body of death" (Romans 7:24) and so they persistently pester their pastors for it until they get it (cf. Luke 18:1-8). In doing so, they are simply demanding what Christ Himself has instituted and promised.

If anyone wants to describe the repentance and faith which makes such demands as a "prerequisite," then he must attribute the potential to meet this prerequisite not to his own ability, but to the work of God's Word and Spirit which crushes with the Law and makes alive by the Gospel. This kind of repentance is something more than merely "being sufficiently sorry for your sins."

It is quite possible to feel sorrow for one's sins without ever thinking about confessing them or repenting of them. One

can feel quite miserable about what he has committed or omitted without doing anything about it. A sense of guilt is by no means the same thing as having a repentant heart as II Corinthians 7:10 tells us, "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death."

Our failure to distinguish between worldly sorrow and repentance may be largely due to how the Law has been preached to us. There is a sharp difference between sermons which preach that obedience to the Law is the goal of the Gospel and the preaching of the Law which cuts us to the heart, laying us bare, speechless and without excuse before the Almighty God. The former may lead to guilt, but it cannot lead us to true repentance.

The Law can be preached in such a way that it demands us to be sufficiently sorrowful for our sin. To paraphrase the Psalmist, "If Thou, O Lord, shouldst mark the degree of sorrow over sin, O Lord, who could be forgiven?" The preaching of the Law which drives us to the Gospel does not demand prerequisites. It simply shows us the horrible disfigurement of our sinful nature and the utter wretchedness of our thoughts, words and deeds before God. When we have seen that, if indeed we could even bear to see it fully, the last thought on our minds would be whether we have met some condition before asking forgiveness.

That being said, let me point a loaded question your way: What prerequisite would have to be met before you would go to your pastor, confess your sins and ask forgiveness? If you can answer that in light of what you have been reading here, you may well be on your way to knowing a kind of praise which swells from the most profound joy. The praise of God which comes from those who want to feel how good life can be with an awesome and glorious God is radically different from the praise which comes from those who have had their sins confessed and absolved by a gracious God in the name of Christ. Isn't it?