

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

LUKE 5:1-11. K.J.V.

Luke 5:1-11

And it came to pass, that, as the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God, he stood by the lake of Gennesaret, And saw two ships standing by the lake: but the fishermen were gone out of them, and were washing their nets. And he entered into one of the ships, which was Simon's, and prayed him that he would thrust out a little from the land. And he sat down, and taught the people out of the ship. Now when he had left speaking, he said unto Simon, Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught. And Simon answering said unto him, Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net. And when they had this done, they inclosed a great multitude of fishes: and their net brake. And they beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them. And they came, and filled both the ships, so that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord. For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the draught of the fishes which they had taken: And so was also James, and John, the sons of Zebedee, which were partners with Simon. And Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men. And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed him.

PART I

CONCERNING FAITH, THE CARE OF GOD, AND OUR DAILY OCCUPATION.

1. This Gospel brings before us two parts, in which it exhorts to faith and strengthens faith. In the first part it shows that Christ cares for those who believe in him, so that they are abundantly supplied against temporal and bodily needs. In the second part it shows that he will help them still more against spiritual needs, thus in reality proving the truth of what St. Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:8: “Godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life which now is, and of that which is to come.” The Scriptures are everywhere full of these two kinds of promises.

2. To faith he assures temporal and bodily help by giving to Peter and his partners so great a draught of fishes after they had vainly toiled all night and caught nothing, and now could have no expectation or hope of taking anything. But herein he adheres to the rule and order which he himself has given and taught in Matthew 6:33: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” He here acts according to this saying and shows its truth by example and experience, inasmuch as the people press upon him in crowds, first to hear his words, and to such an extent that, in order to preach to them, he sets out from land in one of the boats. But when he has taught them he proceeds further to provide for their bodily needs, inasmuch as they are in distress and want.

3. Although it is not indeed the purpose of Christ’s coming or preaching to foster and provide for the body, yet he is not unmindful of it when the first thing sought is his kingdom. He therefore takes upon himself the distress of these poor fishermen who, through all this night, and with all their efforts and toil, have caught nothing. However, as they have lent him their boat to preach, and have listened to him, he, without any thought on their part, and before they have uttered any prayer, provides for them a draught of fishes so great that they are thereby enabled fully to learn and clearly to understand that in him they have a Master who cares for them and will not forsake them, provided they abide in his Word and remain his disciples.

4. He would that his Church, or believing people, should be comforted by the fact that he provides for them, and that somewhere on earth they shall find bread and an abiding place, even though they are everywhere so persecuted and scattered, that their place and

provision in the world must be uncertain. We find this set forth, not only in the present instance, and in others like it, but in many a beautiful passage, such as Psalm 34:10: “The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger; but they that seek Jehovah shall not want any good thing.” And Psalm 33:18-19: “*Behold, the eye of Jehovah is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his loving kindness; to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine.*” And Proverbs 10:3: “*Jehovah will not suffer the soul of the righteous to famish,*” etc.

5. By this example he especially shows how it goes with those upon whom he is to bestow his gifts and assistance, and how he is accustomed to bestow these favors. It goes with them as it went with those fishermen, who labored all the night, yet had nothing for all their trouble and labor, and had nothing to hope for from human counsel or aid. Manifold tribulations, miseries and distress are the daily experience of all Christendom. If Christ is to help, there must be trials, trouble and toil, and it must come to this, that we despair of all human counsel, comfort and ability. Then he comes with his help, and shows that he still has the means of comfort, counsel, protection and deliverance, and that he is able to bestow all this when everything else has failed us, and when all that we have done or suffered, and still may be able to do, is nothing and in vain; yea, that in such need and weakness he gives and helps in richer measure than could be done by all human power, skill and aid.

6. On the other hand, by saying to his disciples: “Put out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught,” Christ shows that he does not forbid work, or would have that neglected which we have been commanded to do. He thereby enjoins upon them to continue in their handicraft. The two things are thus well maintained over against each other, namely, that we must work, and that our work accomplishes nothing. For if toil and trouble could have accomplished anything, then would the disciples have accomplished it during the hours of the night; and all the more so then, as they had hopes of taking a greater number of fishes while the silence and darkness continued than when Christ, in broad daylight, commanded them to let down their nets. Nevertheless, at Christ’s word, and at one draught, they drew them in full to overflowing.

7. From this every one may see and learn that no man lives by his labor or exertion, however great and unhampered this may be, but must live by God’s blessing and grace. Let it remain at this, as the Germans say, that “God helps,” or “God bestows his gifts over night,” which saying has come down to us from pious men of old who realized its truth in their experience. Daily experience still shows that many a one toils, toils and toils, in anxiety and hard work, who yet can scarcely earn his bread or get rid of his debts and poverty; whilst to another, who takes it easy and never overexerts himself, everything

comes and flows in so abundantly that we really must say: “All this comes from God’s help and not from any man’s labor.” In <19C702> Psalm 127:2 we are told: “So he giveth it unto his beloved in sleep,” as if the Psalmist would say: “It is in vain that you fret and plague yourself with cares and labor, day and night, in order to provide what is needed in the home. Much may be needed there; but it does not depend upon your hands and labor at all. Nothing will come of your effort unless God himself is the “House Father” and makes it possible for you to say: *‘God bestows his gifts over night. ’ Grain and all food from the earth, yea, all that a man has, or may acquire, must be given him of God.*”

8. Such favors he also bestows upon the godless and unbelieving, and upon them more than upon others. With temporal goods he fills to overflowing the house and home of many wicked men who never think of a God. And he does this, not by their exertion and labor, but by a simple act of blessing, as we are told concerning such men in Psalm 17:14: “Whose belly thou fillest with thy hid treasure.” It is as if the Psalmist here said: “Deliver me from the men of this world who have their portion in this life, whose belly thou fillest with thy treasure,” that is, with such goods as are divine and hidden treasures of thine own, concerning which no man knows whence they come, and over which he has no power, – treasures which he cannot provide for himself, but must be provided and bestowed by thee alone.

9. Hereby Christ would have Christians aroused and strengthened in faith, and protected against unbelief with its harmful fruits, such fruits, especially, as covetousness, and anxious cares for the body and the present life. These cling to man by nature like an inborn plague which, together with the lusts of unbelief, moves and rages against the Spirit, as St. Paul teaches in Galatians 5:17. Moreover, the devil seeks to hinder faith by his temptations and suggestions to mistrust and doubt God. This, too, the world does by its hatred, envy and persecution of the righteous, whose goods and honor and life it is after, and whom it would use as mats for its feet. On the other hand (I say), we here perceive both the power and advantage of the faith which holds fast to Christ’s Word and ventures thereon, as Peter does, saying: “Although we have toiled all night and taken nothing, yet at thy word I will let down the nets.” It is this faith that so enlarges the draught of fishes as to fill the two boats; for without this the nets would not have been let down, nor would any fish have been caught.

10. Scripture, however, everywhere shows the harm that is done by the avarice and anxieties of unbelief. For unbelief can by no means obtain anything from God that would benefit, comfort or bless it, but so deprives itself of the divine benediction that it can have no satisfaction or joy in the temporal goods it desires, and can never possess a good and

peaceful conscience. Hence it is that Christ, in Matthew 13:22, speaks of all anxiety, with regard to sustenance, as thorns, on account of which the Word of God cannot put forth its strength or its fruits. St. Paul expounds the meaning of the thorns in 1 Timothy 6:9-10, saying: *“They that are minded to be rich fall into a temptation and a snare and many foolish and hurtful lusts, such as drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil; which some reaching after have been led astray from the faith, and have pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”*

11. Here compare the good things that faith brings and does, with the harm that is done by unbelief. For, in addition to this, that faith has the divine grace and blessing, it also has the promise that it shall be sufficiently supplied with all that it needs. It fills the heart with such goodness, peace and joy that it may well be called the root of all good things. Unbelief, on the other hand, with all its cares and covetousness, shall have this as its reward, that it is not bettered thereby, but must fall into all sorts of snares through many hurtful lusts and desires; and thus it attains to nothing in the end but eternal destruction. It is therefore nothing but the root whence all misfortunes spring.

12. These two things are clearly seen in the world. Those men are at rest and in peace who content themselves with the things that God provides. They journey onward cheerfully and courageously, whatever their calling may be. They have enough to live on, and all their necessities are so well supplied that they must say to themselves: “No evening yet have I gone hungry to sleep,” although it appears as if affliction and want are at their very doors, as, according to our text, was the case with Peter. They have this benefit from their confidence and faith in God, that they need not fret and wound themselves among the thorns (cares for the body), or be stung and injured by them, but can, so to speak, sit amid roses in a garden of pleasure. As Solomon says in Proverbs 15:15: “He that is of a cheerful heart hath a continual feast.” The others, however, who plant themselves among the thorns of avarice, and seek after great possessions, must suffer the consequences of being stung and torn and must fall, not only into manifold temptations and dangers, (which would be a mercy, if it only remained at that), but also into snares wherein they are so thoroughly caught that they sink to a temporal destruction and eternal damnation from which they can never again escape.

13. Of this we see daily examples in those who boast of the Gospel and their Christianity. Everywhere we find robbery, oppression, assessment, usury, etc. , to such an extent that even God and conscience are set aside for the sake of a miserable penny. Then, as if such a fall were not deep enough, they harden themselves, and keep on their course defiantly and sacriliciously, until they sink so far as to become enemies of God’s Word, become blind and deaf, yea, become so unblessed and accursed that they are of no service in any

station, and can do nothing that is wholesome and good or useful to the pleasure and improvement of others. All they can do is to cause and bring harm, misfortune and misery upon land and people.

14. All comes from this, as St. Paul says, that men are bent on being rich. For such covetousness and cares do assuredly keep company with a pride that makes men aim at being something great and powerful. Covetousness would appropriate everything to itself. It begins at first by saying: "Would that I had this house, this field, this castle, this village," etc. Thus it grows greater and greater till it becomes a dragon's tail that draws everything after it. And where covetousness has once become rooted there it daily brings forth cares of a hundred different kinds, as it seeks to obtain still more goods and gold. There the human heart boils and bubbles with countless insatiable lusts, and desires, that serve no other purpose than its own destruction, and spring from no other source than man's fall from faith, and thence from one temptation and snare into another. It is a dreadful plague that has taken such thorough possession of men that, on account of it, they can do nothing good or useful in their station, and no longer have any thought of serving God or man.

15. When one has scraped together a great deal, he has no less trouble in retaining and protecting it. He must then try to gain favor and friendship, and in all sorts of ways seek to prevent the loss of his property. In the meantime he brings upon himself hatred and envy and troubles of many kinds, from which he cannot escape; and thus, as St. Paul shows, there is nothing left but disturbance and sorrows of conscience, and a veritable hell, into which the man has cast himself. Upon the covetous man the plague and curse have already been pronounced that he shall never be satisfied, and, furthermore, that he must endure all sorts of misfortune and heartgriefs through the very things he has coveted to his everlasting destruction and damnation.

16. We see from daily experience what shameful and accursed vice covetousness is, and what harm it does, especially in high office, whether clerical or lay. If the money fiend has taken possession of a pastor's or preacher's heart, so that he, like the rest of the world, only aims at securing for himself great riches, then has he already, like Judas the traitor, fallen into the jaws of the devil, and is prepared, for a few pieces of silver, to betray Christ and his Word and his Church. Thus has the Pope, in order to secure and maintain his riches and dominion, introduced, in the name of God and the Church, all sorts of idolatries and abominations, and has openly led multitudes of souls to the devil, so filling men with the false terrors of his ban that no one dares to say a word against it.

17. How harmful it is in civil governments when lords and princes are dominated by this shameful vice, aiming to appropriate everything to themselves. Thereby they forget to exercise their princely office so as to be of help to the land and people over whom, for this purpose, they have been placed as lords, and thus they forfeit the commendation and love which, with all honor and praise, they should receive as the fathers of their people and country. They do not concern themselves about the spread of God's Word, the administration and support of churches and schools, the proper instruction of the people, or the maintenance of law and order among their subjects. They permit destitute pastors, with their children, widows and orphans, to suffer injustice, violence and want. In the meantime they go about with their tax lists, and only consider how they may collect money enough for their excessive expenditures and pomp. And when this does not suffice, they flay and tax their poor subjects to such an extent that they themselves fall into perplexities and difficulties which must bring poverty and ruin upon themselves, their land and their people. Or if, in their avarice, they have already accumulated enough to make them think they are quite rich, then, in order to carry out their undertakings, they involve themselves in manifold strange dealings and affairs that finally, to their own punishment, they bring upon themselves great burdens and ruin.

18. What a dreadful disaster and ruin has been brought upon Germany merely by the shameful and accursed usury which has everywhere gotten the upper hand, so that there is no longer any check or restraint to it, especially as those who should check it are themselves mixed up in it. Nowadays every one who has the power, by means of his money, impoverishes his neighbors, and thereby sets God and conscience aside. Thus, with open eyes, and with an evil, self-accusing conscience, he speeds off to hell, burdened with the curse that has been pronounced upon the abominations of covetousness, – the curse, that he shall not himself enjoy such property in peace and tranquility as has been gained by usury, but either himself shall lose it by God's visitation or it shall not descend to his heirs. Upon such un-Christian doings must come the fearful wrath and punishment of God, which alas! we have long ago greatly deserved; and the time must come when he will turn us out of doors, together with the Turks and other terrible plagues, so that, since we would not heed his Word and admonition, he himself may put a forcible end to this godless business.

19. This the believer avoids and escapes who, with good conscience and godly fear, occupies his station in life peacefully and quietly, and is satisfied with the things that God gives him. He does not expose himself to the dangers of temptation or snares. He is in no need of troubling himself with cares and anxieties, or of engaging with others in bickering and brawling disputes, quarrels, jealousies and hatreds. He is a man of fine, blessed and useful character, one who can be of service and assistance to many. He finds

grace and favor with God and man that shall benefit and honor even his children's children.

20. The example before us in this Gospel should teach and admonish us that we may learn to believe, and thus experience through faith, that God cares for his children and provides for them to such an extent that they need not worry and condemn themselves with cares or covetousness. And yet, though cares and covetousness are forbidden, it should be borne in mind, as I have already said, that no one dare cease from labor. The world turns these two things upside down, as it usually does with all the words and ordinances of God. To care and to strive for the obtaining of gold and goods is something it is determined to do. Such care, however, concerns God alone, and for himself alone has he reserved it. And yet the world is willing enough to let God attend to the work which it has been commanded to do; yea, all the aim of its cares and covetousness is to be set free from working in the sweat of its face. God wants just the opposite. He wants us to keep the work and to leave the care with him. By doing this we shall do our part, and, with moderate labor and no care, we shall soon come into possession of all we need.

21. When Christ wished to bestow his gift upon Peter and others he did not cause the fish to leap into the boat without labor or nets, as he very well might have done. But he commanded them to put out into the deep and let down their nets. That is, they should engage in the handicraft they understood and had learnt and were accustomed to, and should act as fishermen. Christ keeps aloof from the lazy, unfaithful idlers who will not do as they have been commanded, and will not keep their hands and feet from straying. Thus he teaches a twofold lesson, that he will not give us anything unless we work for it, and that the things we obtain do not come from our work, but only from God's help and blessing. You are to work, but you are not to depend upon that work, as if that which resulted therefrom were of your own accomplishment.

22. In short, our work produces and bestows nothing. Yet it is necessary as a means through which we may receive what God gives. The disciples must use their hands to let down the nets and to draw them in, if they wish to secure anything, and must be willing to do so. Yet they are obliged to acknowledge that their labor did not bring about the result, otherwise they would have succeeded, in the first place, without Christ. He therefore permits them to make a sufficient trial, and to discover by experience that the toil of this entire night has been in vain and to no purpose.

23. This he teaches us by daily experience in all sorts of affairs and doings and governments on earth. Very often he permits us to labor long and arduously and without results, till it becomes bitterly painful to us, and we are forced to complain with Peter:

“We toiled all night, and took nothing.” This he does that we may not venture to depend upon our labor, but may know that he must grant it success, and that we have not secured this through our own effort, skill or diligence.

24. What diligence, money and effort many a father and mother have bestowed in order to rear their son to honor and virtue, and that with a hope and confidence as great as if (to use a common expression) he were to become an angel. And yet he has become nothing but a notoriously willful and prodigal child. On the other hand, many a poor and forlorn orphan, upon whom very little effort and diligence have been expended, has grown up so surprisingly well-bred as to make us think that it just happened so, and did not depend upon any diligence or care of our own.

25. Of what do all civil governments more generally complain than of fruitless labors and efforts, even where their work is carried on energetically and in earnest, and where there are men who are willing and able to rule well, – men who are not lacking in wisdom, understanding, power and might? These are obliged to learn, after a long period of governing, that thereby they have not accomplished anything. How often it happens, indeed, that the best plans, the wisest counsels, and the brightest ideas prove to be the very worst, and result in nothing but harm and ruin. The very wisest rulers have always experienced and complained of this. And thus we may learn that God will not grant prosperity and success through human wisdom, plans and intrigues, if these are the things we depend upon.

26. Hence, if the world be willing to receive counsel from a plain and straightforward man, namely, from the Lord our God, who certainly has had some experience and understands the art of ruling, the best counsel would be, that each one, in his administration of government, should simply direct his thoughts and plans to a faithful prosecution and believing performance of the duties enjoined upon him, not placing any dependence upon his own thoughts and plans, but casting all his cares upon God. The man who does this will at last be sure to discover that he who trusts in God accomplishes more than he who seeks to transact his affairs according to his own wisdom and thought, or in his own power and might.

27. So it goes in the spiritual government of the Church, as specially indicated in the narrative now before us. Where I have preached and taught during the past ten or twenty years, there another could, perhaps, have done more in one year; and one sermon may bring forth more fruit than many others. Here, also, it is true that our labor, diligence and effort can accomplish nothing. These two things must go together, namely, that each one does his duty, and that he, nevertheless, acknowledges with Peter: “My labor cannot

bring forth anything, if thou dost not give the increase.” As Paul also says in 1 Corinthians **3:6-7** *“I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase,” etc.*

28. In short, all human nature and life are so that, until God gives the increase, we may often labor long and much, and all to no purpose. But the work is not to cease on that account, nor should any man be found without work. He must wait for the increase till God gives it, as Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 11:6: *“In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand; for thou knowest not which shall prosper, whether this or that,” etc.*

29. However, the circumstances are especially pointed out under which work becomes useful and fruitful, namely, when Christ appears and commands to let down the nets, etc., that is, when there is a faith that takes hold of his Word and promise and then, cheerfully and bravely, does what has been commanded, waiting, with prayer and supplication, for his help and blessing. This is to say with Peter: “Lord, I have indeed done and labored and suffered ninth, but I know that I shall accomplish nothing thereby, unless thou art present to give strength and increase. I will therefore depend, not upon myself or my own works, but upon thy Word, and will leave everything to thy care.” Thus shall we prosper; and experience shows that Christ, when he is present, gives more as the result of little labor and effort than any one would have dared to hope. For there can be no failure or scanty fruits where he adds his blessing.

30. Thus the disciples could see the experience for themselves what a difference there is between the work they had done all the previous night without faith in Christ, and the work they did when, without prospect of taking anything, they nevertheless, through faith in Christ’s word, and at one draught, drew in an overflowing multitude of fishes. Therefore, if we accomplish little or nothing through our labor and effort, we must put the blame upon our unbelief, or upon the weakness of our faith, and not upon anything else.

31. Yet this is also true, that Christ often delays the bestowal of his help, as he did on this occasion, and on another, John 21, when he permitted the disciples to toil all the night without taking anything, and really appeared as if he would forget his own Word and promise. But this he does that he may drive us to implore his help the more earnestly, and that we may learn to strengthen and maintain our faith, so that we do not doubt, or cease to labor, but continue to wait for the bestowal of his gifts in his own good time and way. For it is his purpose to guide all Christians into a knowledge and experience of the fact

that their livelihood and help do not depend on what they see or do, but upon what is invisible and hidden. This he therefore calls his “hid treasure,” as we have already said in regard to Psalm 17:14:, that is, such blessing, help and deliverance as we have not perceived or laid hold of before, but are hidden in his Word and are grasped by faith.

32. Behold, this is the first part of our Gospel, the events of which took place and were recorded that Christians might be instructed and comforted by the fact that Christ cares even for the temporal needs of his Church, so that it is fed and supported, although it should come into a distress where everything is at the point of ruin, and where it seems to have done and suffered everything in vain. Always and everywhere does it happen that the Gospel, as it advances, brings poverty in its train, together with hunger and nakedness and want. But at last, when the storms of the devil have blown over a little, and the world’s greed and appetite have been satisfied, Christ comes and declares that he, too, is a Lord of the earth. For in Psalm 24:1 it is written: “The earth is Jehovah’s, and the fullness thereof,” etc. Also in Psalm 8:6-8: “Thou hast put all things under thy feet; all sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; the fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea.” All these must obey our Lord, and must bend beneath his scepter, so that the world, after all, cannot prevent him and his from sharing in its food.

33. But, as I have said, we must first have hunger and want, that is, Peter’s empty boat and net, even where there has been long-continued labor. Yet Christ, after such a trial, makes his gifts all the more abundant, not only a tub full, with which the disciples might have been satisfied, but the entire net full and the two empty boats full. He does this that their faith in his spiritual help may thereby be strengthened, He shows this sign to Peter, and to the others whom he intends to call to be his Apostles, not only in order that they should believe that he would care for their bodies, but that he would so strengthen and help them in their apostolic calling that it should not prove to be in vain or fruitless.

PART II

THE SPIRITUAL DISTRESS AND CONFLICT OF CONSCIENCE

34. The second part of this Gospel presents the great doctrine of the inner distress and conflict of conscience, and what constitutes our true comfort in the midst of it. Only after Peter saw this wonderful work of Christ and the abundance it produced, did he begin to consider what sort of a Man this Wonderworker must be, and what sort of a man he himself was in comparison. Out of this great blessing there comes upon him a greater distress than he has ever experienced from any bodily want. He now becomes so thoroughly poor and destitute, that, on account of terror, he almost sinks to the earth and bids Christ depart from him. He has begun to feel his unworthiness and sins. He is forced to acknowledge and lament that he is a poor sinner.

35. Peter is to become a different man; and a greater miracle is to be wrought in him than in the draught of fishes. The sermon which Christ had previously preached from the boat now first began to have its effect upon him. He, with the others, had indeed listened to Christ before this, but he had given no thought to the character of his Person. He had not thought of obtaining any temporal or eternal good from him; nor had he yet begun to tremble on account of his sins. But now when Peter perceives the miracle and the blessing, and realizes, through the present event, what sort of a Man this Jesus is, he stumbles at the greatness of the blessing and of the Person on the one hand, and, on the other, at the extent of his own unworthiness. He trembles on account of his sins. His heart tells him that he does not deserve such great favor, and that he is far more deserving of God's wrath and disfavor. He is now filled with anxiety and fear, not as to temporal poverty, or as to means of support, for he has been supplied with what he needs; but as to his ability to stand before God and before this man who has shown this great favor to such an unworthy and sinful human being as he.

36. This is the way Christ begins to make Peter spiritually rich in things that are eternally good, so that he may be able to impart them to others, yea, to the entire world. As on a previous occasion, he must first feel spiritual hunger and distress, that is, terror and anguish of conscience, before he can attain to forgiveness and to comfort. The boat and the world have become too narrow for him. He knows not whither to betake himself from Christ, whom, however, he has found to be, not terrifying, but friendly and helpful.

37. Here you see how poor and miserable conscience is when it really begins to feel its sins. how it trembles'. How it runs to escape from God when he draws nigh, as if it would run across a hundred worlds! Thus Adam in Paradise thought to hide himself when God kindly asked: "Adam, where art thou?" So shy and timorous is such a heart and conscience that it gets frightened at itself, and flees from a rustling leaf as from thunder and lightning. It cannot endure the judgment of the Law, which reveals its sins and God's eternal wrath. And here it is of no use to comfort a man by reminding him of the favors that God has shown him in the past. This only terrifies him all the more, as thereby he realizes that he deserves still greater wrath on account of his ingratitude and sins.

38. Yea, even they have ever to contend with this temptation and fear who already have received the comfort of the grace of God through faith. For his goodness and grace are too great and overwhelming. On the other hand, our heart, in the feeling and consideration of its own unworthiness, is far too narrow and feeble to hold and comprehend such great goodness and mercy. At this it is simply filled with amazement. God therefore shows himself merciful to us by veiling and covering these things under simple words and beneath great weakness.

39. But such is the awful wickedness of our nature that, even when Christ comes to us with his grace and comfort, we avoid and flee from our Savior, while we rather, though naked and barefooted, should run after him to the ends of the earth. We turn and twist, and resort to our own works, and would first, by our own efforts, cleanse and make ourselves worthy enough to deserve such a gracious God and Christ. Thus Peter thinks to seek peace and to escape sin by running away from the Lord. He first looks for something in himself to make him worthy of coming to Christ, but thereby only falls all the more deeply into terror and despair, until the Savior, by his word, raises him up again.

40. All this does, and indeed must, come to pass, where nothing but the Law is taught and understood, and where Christ is not rightly and fully known through the Gospel. A knowledge of the Law has been inscribed and implanted in every human heart by nature, as St. Paul says in Romans 2:15. The Law teaches us what we are to do, and pronounces us guilty of disobedience. It does so in many ways, not only through dreadful tokens and feelings of punishment and of God's anger, but also through the various gifts and operations of the Lord, that appear to the eyes and ears of man and point out to him the sin and divine wrath which follow upon their abuse in contempt and disobedience towards God. From this he may conclude that those who are ungrateful to God for his gifts and favors, are worthy of his wrath and condemnation.

41. All God's benefits when they move the heart, are really living sermons unto repentance that lead a man to acknowledge his sins and make him fear them, as St. Paul, in Romans 2:1, says to the impenitent, hardened hypocrite: "*Despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and long suffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?*"

42. Hence, there is nothing in the juggling tricks which our Antinomians play upon this example, when they say that repentance is not to be preached and practiced through the Law, but through the Gospel, or, as they put it, through the revelation of the Son. They change the proper order of the two parts: the revelation of grace and the revelation of wrath, as if we are first to preach comfort through grace and afterwards to terrify through wrath. This is nothing but a blind and foolish pretext on the part of these people. They have no understanding of wrath or grace or repentance, and know not how to comfort the conscience.

43. All preaching of sin and God's wrath is a preaching of the Law, no matter how or when it may be done. On the other hand, the Gospel is such preaching as sets forth and bestows nothing but grace and forgiveness in Christ. And yet it is true that the Apostles and preachers of the Gospel sanctioned the preaching of the Law, as Christ himself did, and began with this in the case of those who had not yet acknowledged their sins and had felt no fear of God's anger. Thus our Lord says in John 16:8: "The Comforter, when he is come, will convict the world in respect of sin," etc. Yea, what more solemn and terrible proof and preaching of God's wrath can there be than the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ, his son? It is not the preaching of the Gospel, nor is it Christ's own preaching, but the preaching of Moses and the Law to the impenitent, so long as nothing but God's wrath is preached and men are terrified. For the Gospel and Christ were neither ordained nor given in order to terrify or condemn, but to comfort and raise up such as are fearful and faint-hearted. And from this it follows that the man, whose heart has been rightly impressed by the sufferings of Christ, must, of his own accord, see and feel in these the unbearable wrath of God against sin, and thereby be so stricken with fear that the world becomes too narrow for him. St. Bernard testifies that this was his experience as soon as he gained a right insight into the sufferings of Christ. He says: "*Alas, I thought I was safe! I knew nothing of the judgment and wrath that had come upon me, till I saw that the only begotten Son of God had to take my place,*" etc. This idea is so terrible that even the damned in hell can have no greater torment, no greater feeling of God's wrath and condemnation, than this vision of the death of the Son of God, the benefits of which they have forfeited. Thus Judas, the traitor, as he would not heed the kindly admonitions and warnings of the Lord Jesus, and would not take into consideration how he acted towards

him, was finally driven into such terror by this vision that he preached the Law and damnation to himself in saying: *“I have betrayed innocent blood,”* etc. , Matthew 27:4.

44. In like manner, Peter preaches to himself the Law concerning his sins and God’s wrath, and takes as his text Christ’s great kindness towards him. From this kindness he can gather nothing but wrath and terror on account of his unworthiness before God. For he has, as yet, no other understanding in his heart than that of the Law, which Law shows that God is hostile to sin and will punish it. He is still ignorant of the grace of Christ which, through the Gospel, is freely offered to all sinners. To this grace he could not have attained, but must have despaired in ‘the midst of his terror, had not Christ delivered another sermon whereby he comforted him and raised him up. For, of himself, no man can grasp this doctrine, or arrive at an understanding of it, without the revelation of the Holy Spirit through the word of the Gospel.

45. Hence those foolish souls are entirely wrong, who allege that the Law is not to be preached under the New Testament dispensation, or that men are to be terrified with God’s wrath through the Gospel only after grace has been preached to them. For it is certain that the Gospel preaches no wrath; nor does it cause fear and anguish. When it comes, it is for the purpose of comforting consciences. The order everywhere indicated and observed by Scripture is this, that sin must always be acknowledged and fear of God’s wrath be realized, through the preaching or experience of the Law, before there can be such comfort as proceeds from forgiveness, the purpose of this order being that men may be led to long for grace and be made fit to receive the comfort of the Gospel. Those, therefore, who are yet without any fear of God’s wrath, who are secure and hardened and unyielding, must be strongly admonished and urged to repentance by the threats and terrors of that wrath, that is, to them no Gospel is to be preached, but only the Law and Moses.

46. On the other hand, no law is to be preached to those in whose hearts it has wrought its purpose so that, through the realization of their sins, they have become terrified, faint-hearted and fearful. To such as these nothing is to be preached but the Gospel and its comfort. For it is really the purpose of Christ’s coming, and of his command to preach the Gospel to all poor sinners, that they should believe that it abolishes and does away with all the accusations and fears and threatenings of the Law, and puts a perfect comfort in their place. This he everywhere teaches in the Gospel; and in Luke 4:18, quoted from Isaiah 61:1, he says: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor.” I have often said, therefore, that Moses must not be permitted to dominate the consciences that are agitated by the assaults of the devil and the dread of God’s wrath, but that these are straightway to dismiss Moses, together with the entire Law, and not listen to him.

47. But besides, we must bear in mind that the doctrine of the Law is not to be entirely done away with, even in the case of those who are Christians, inasmuch as Christians must exercise themselves in daily repentance, because they still live in the flesh which is moved by sinful lusts. hence they must be so taught and admonished, after they have received the forgiveness of sins, that they do not fall back again into a state of security, or give the flesh occasion to war against the Spirit. Galatians 5:13.

48. Such is Peter's experience at this time. In his terror he has not, as yet, any revelation or knowledge of grace or forgiveness of sins. The revelation of wrath is working in him, and this impels him to flee even from Christ, which he certainly would not have done, had he rightly known him. But Christ is now about to make of him a true Christian, about to make him experience the real comfort of conscience which overcomes the terror of the Law and raises man from the misery of sin to grace and blessedness, from death to life, from hell to heaven. It is necessary, therefore, that he should first have a real taste of that power of the Law which is roused and wrought, not by Christ, but by Moses through the ten Commandments.

49. Now, see how kindly Christ comforts the terrified heart and conscience. He says: "Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men." In tones so truly loving does the Savior speak to all who are in fear and terror by reason of their sins. He will not have them to remain any longer in fear and anguish. He takes away from them all the dread of the Law, and shows them that they should not, on account of their sins, flee from him but to him, so that they may learn to know him as the loving Savior who has come into this world, not to reject poor sinners, but to allure them to himself, and to enrich and bless them with his comfort and help. He therefore says, in Luke 19:10: "*The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost.*" And in 1 Timothy 1:15 St. Paul says: "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.*"

50. Not only does Christ give comfort to poor, terror-stricken Peter by the kindly words in which he declares and offers to him his grace and absolution, but he goes on to strengthen this comfort by the great promise that he will give him something far beyond anything he has hitherto received from him; and all this in order that Peter may perceive and experience how Christ's heart and love go out to him. "From henceforth," Christ says, "thou shalt catch men." That Peter is not to be alarmed on account of his unworthiness and sins is, in itself, an abundant comfort and grace. However, he is not only to have the forgiveness of his sins, but is also to know that God intends to accomplish still greater things through him by making him a help and comfort to others. What Christ would say is this: "*That which thou hast accomplished by this draught*

of fishes is much too little; really, it is nothing at all. Thou art henceforth to become a different kind of fisherman, in a different sea, with a different net and boat. For I am going to engage thee in a business which shall be called 'catching men'; and this means that, throughout the entire world, thou art to draw away souls from the power of the devil into the kingdom of God. Then, first, wilt thou become the sort of man that can help others, even as thou thyself hast been helped."

51. From this Gospel let us rightly acknowledge and lay hold upon Christ and the power of his comfort, in order that we may comfort both ourselves and others, and may instruct and remind the consciences which are in distress and fear that they are by no means to run or flee away from Christ, but should much rather flee to him and wait for his comfort. Thus to run away, thus to fear, is nothing else than to drive your own salvation and happiness away from you. For Christ has not come to make you afraid, but to remove from you your sins and distress. Nor does he draw nigh and follow after you in order to drive you away, but that he may kindly allure you to himself. You must therefore not do him the dishonor of thrusting him away from you. And you must not pervert to your own fear and despair the comfort he brings you, but much rather run to him in all confidence. Then you will soon hear the cheering and comforting words: "Fear not?" which he speaks to your heart, and to the hearts of all troubled consciences, and through them he pronounces absolution for all sins and removes all fear. Yea, he will grant you a still richer grace by making you such a holy, blessed and useful man in his kingdom, that you can be of comfort to others, and can bring those to him who, like yourself, are now full of fear and in need of comfort and grace.

52. Here you see how a man is delivered from spiritual poverty and distress, that is, how, through Christ's Word, he obtains forgiveness of sins and peace of conscience together with grace and increase of spiritual gifts, without any merit or worthiness of his own but only through the grace of Christ. It is in this respect as it was with the temporal miracle of the draught of fishes, which the disciples did not secure by reason of their toil, and which was not given to them before they had labored and striven in vain, and had despaired of taking anything. And yet, as Christ on that occasion does not forbid their laboring, but commands them to let down their nets for a draught, so now he does not abolish works. Although Peter does not deserve grace and forgiveness by what he does, but receives forgiveness and grace freely, yet the Lord will not permit him to dispense with all work and effort. Yea, he assigns to him the duty and business of bringing the same blessings to others, and, in the assignment of this duty, comforts him with the assurance that the necessary power and blessing shall be added. "For," says he, "I will make thee a fisher of men." Thus are the two parts rightly taught, namely, that faith deserves nothing by its works, and yet, that it performs all sorts of works in its station and calling, according to the word and command of God.

PART III

THE SPIRITUAL MEANING OF THIS DRAUGHT OF FISHES.

53. Christ himself teaches the meaning of this history of Peter's draught of fishes when he says: *"From henceforth thou shalt catch men."* Herein is represented the spiritual rule of the Church, which consists in the office of preaching. The sea, or the water, represents the world, the fishes represent men, while the outward office of preaching is represented by the hand and the net by which the fishes are caught. For as the net is let down among the waves, so the sermon finds its way among men.

54. But this office of preaching is of twofold One seeks to win men without Christ. This is the preaching of the Law, which demands of us nothing but works, and either makes arrogant saints who, without accomplishing anything, would pursue their own free, unhampered course through the wild and watery wastes, or only terrifies and drives away the consciences which, without works, are timid and weak.

55. Hence the labor and effort of the entire night (of the Law) must prove vain and lost until Christ comes with the other kind of preaching, – until he brings with him the dawn and revelation of the comforting and cheering Gospel that enlightens the hearts of men with the knowledge of the grace of God, – until he commands us to let down the net for a draught. When this is done at his word and command, great and rich fruits are the result. Then men's hearts are willing and ready to come to the obedience of faith in Christ, yea, even to press forward to it, and to venture life and limb in its attainment, as Christ says in Matthew 11:12: *"From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and men of violence take it by storm."*

56. This draught of fishes is so great that the one boat alone (hitherto representing the Church of the Jewish people) is not able to draw it up or large enough to contain it. Those in the one boat must beckon to their partners in the other to come and help them. This other boat is the assembly and Church of the Gentiles which has been established and spread by the Apostles. Thus were the two boats filled with one and the same draught of fishes, that is, with one and the same sort of preaching, and with a corresponding faith and confession.

57. Owing to the great draught the nets began to break, and some of the fishes fell out. These are they who are not sincere, and do not abide in the Gospel, but cast themselves out of it, preferring to continue amid their free and wild waves rather than submit themselves to Christ. So there were many, especially among the Jews, who disobeyed and gainsaid the Gospel. These, and all others who establish sects and factions of their own, may not and cannot continue with the true band of God's people in the assembly of the Church, but make themselves manifest as being good for nothing. Hence St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:19: *"There must be also factions among you, that they who are approved may be made manifest among you."* These sects and factions must therefore fall away, while the others are gathered together out of the net and put into the two boats, where they are so kept, in the unity of the Church and of faith in Christ, that they do not fall away again. Otherwise they would be in danger of falling away at last, together with the factions by whom they had been seduced.

58. And as the net suffers through being let down into the water and becomes wet, so must the office of preaching suffer through all sorts of trials and persecutions in the world, even to the extent of being rent and torn. It cannot produce profitable or fruitful results in all men; yet great power and much fruit are found in those who remain steadfast and are kept to the end. It is our comfort, however, that Christ, through our preaching, will lead his own into the boat, and will keep them there, although we know that we cannot make devout men of all to whom we preach, and that we cannot escape persecution on account of our office; yea, though we know that many will fall away even among those of whom we felt sure that we had them in the net.

Content Page



First Page