

TRINITY SUNDAY [= [Or Sunday After Pentecost]

JOHN 3:1-15.

German text: Erlangen Edition, 12:427; Walch Edition, II, 1569; St. Louis Walch. 11:1162.

Contents:

The instruction Christ gives Nicodemus on the new birth, and the righteousness that avails before God.

John 3:1-15 K.J.V.

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

1. This is another beautiful Gospel and treats of the foremost and chief doctrine in Christendom, namely, the article, How a person becomes holy and righteous in the sight of God. And there is here placed before us a beautiful allegory, showing how reason at its best and holiness in its highest state on earth run aground upon the genuine truth and spiritualness of this matter. For this person, Nicodemus, is highly praised by the Evangelist John, who states that he was great both as to the esteem with which he was regarded among his fellow men, and also as to his beautiful life in accordance with the Law. He was a ruler of the Jews, that is. a counselor in their governmental affairs; and in addition a Pharisee, that is, one of the most learned men, for they were regarded as the wisest. Moreover, he was one of the most pious men; for the members of this sect. were considered the greatest saints. Thus, no fault or blame can be laid on him, and he cannot be made greater: in the government he is a ruler, in knowledge the wisest, and in his life the saintliest.

2. Above these, there is in him another grace, namely, that he has a fondness for Christ, the Lord. This was a virtue far above the other three. The other rulers and Pharisees, though they were the wisest and holiest men, persecuted Christ and allied him with the devil; and no one dared to grumble at their decision; for the grumbler was expelled from the council and unchurched. Still, Nicodemus is so holy as to love Christ and to approach him in secret in order to speak with him and show his love for him.

3. Indeed, he must have been a particularly excellent man among the Pharisees and a man as truly pious as he could be by nature and according to the Law, earnestly seeking the truth and inquiring how and what men were teaching and preaching. Being a wise man, he also observed that this Jesus must be an extraordinary person, and was moved by his miracles to desire to hear him personally and to speak with him regarding his doctrine. For, no doubt, he had heard and learned that John the Baptist recently had introduced a new sort of preaching and baptism and had proclaimed the Messiah, who was then coming, while he had sharply and severely attacked and reprovved the Pharisees, as this man is now also doing. Accordingly, he is moved to go to him and to hear what it is that he teaches, and what he is reprovving. For an intelligent person like himself cannot understand why there should be anything deserving censure or blame in the Pharisees' holy life according to the Law and in their beautiful works.

4. Therefore, he goes to Christ with thoughts like these: Christ will rejoice to see me come and will be highly pleased because such a great and excellent man, one of the rulers and of the best of men, so humbles himself and shows such honor to a lowly person like Christ as to go to him and to seek his friendship, a thing Christ dare not expect of anyone. Thus he sets out in a pleasant mood, expecting to be made welcome and to be very kindly received. Nor has he the least fear that possibly he may be reprovved or put to school, but he imagines that, since he is acting like a good friend, Christ will in turn treat him respectfully and kindly. Occasionally it still may happen that an earnest preacher is deceived by a person of this sort and allows the good opinion

expressed to tickle him, causing him to flatter and fawn in turn. Nicodemus, then, begins with these words: *“Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God”* etc.

5. That is great praise for this preacher, by which Nicodemus offers his testimony that Christ’s doctrine is from God; that is, that it is genuine truth and God’s Word, notwithstanding Christ was not thus esteemed by all the Pharisees and rulers, but rather considered a seditious spirit and an impostor who had come forward without a commission from the proper authorities, and, in opposition to them, would attach the people to himself etc. Nevertheless, since Christ introduces a doctrine other than that which they had learned heretofore from the Law, and since he assails the Pharisees so vigorously, Nicodemus is as yet perplexed and desires to know what better and different things Christ can possibly teach. His remarks are as if to say: We see and know very well that your doctrine is beyond reproach and censure and must be true and divine; and whoever wants to bear witness to the truth must so confess. For this is proven by the signs and wonders which you do and which no other ever has done nor can do. However, what do you mean by bringing forward another doctrine and by reprovng us? Are our doctrine and works, then, vain and valueless? What do you find in them to censure? We surely have the Law of Moses, which, without a doubt, was given by God. Why, then, do you reprove us when we exert ourselves with all diligence to keep and fulfill the Law, as though God had no pleasure therein and we could not thereby enter heaven? And why do you receive publicans and other manifest sinners instead? What other and better things with which to please God can be taught or practiced?

6. Thus you see that the question which Nicodemus seeks to have answered by Christ is none other than, How may a person lead a righteous life in the sight of God or, as the apostles express it, how become righteous and obtain eternal life? To this question Christ returns a curt and dry answer; he shows himself an altogether different person than Nicodemus had expected to find him. First, he affronts Nicodemus rather harshly, and repels him, as it were, with a thunderbolt, saying: *“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

7. This is a hard text indeed, and an unfriendly reply to so friendly a greeting. For with these words he upsets all pretensions of Nicodemus; yea, he demolishes and condemns all his works and life. He means to say: You consider me not qualified to censure your beautiful discipline and worship as Pharisees, and unable to teach anything better; that is, you do not regard me more than a teacher and instructor of human works, even as you place no higher esteem on your Messiah and expect him to be no more than a person who will praise and laud, guard and keep, your Law and regulations, and who on that account will place you in high honor and authority. But since you take me for a master come from God, I will tell you something that you have not heard before and do not know: My dear Nicodemus, do not imagine that you will please God and be saved by your life and works, no matter how beautiful and precious they may be, even though they be according to the Law. Although it is true that God has given the Law and

demands that you keep it, still you are not righteous in God's sight on that account; for it is one thing to have the Law and another to fulfill it. It is far from being fulfilled by your outward performance of its works. It must be kept wholly and perfectly, with body and soul, and from the innermost heart, without any disobedience and sin whatever. You Pharisees and self-righteous people are not doing this; for you imagine that you can give God his due by outward holiness, and, relying on and being secure in such holiness, you live in a false confidence, void of the fear of God, yea, you despise his wrath against sin. Moreover, you despise and condemn other people who do not regard your holiness highly and do not pattern after it.

8. To state the matter briefly, he says: Your life and works, which you consider holy, and those of all Pharisees, yea, of all men, are void and avail nothing in the sight of God. A change must take place by which a person is born anew, that is, he must become an entirely different person; otherwise he cannot enter the kingdom of God. There, now, you hear what is my doctrine, about which you have inquired. I do not teach in opposition to the Law of God, to destroy it, but I only charge you with not having kept it, yea, with not understanding it, though you pretend to be its instructors and imagine that you are fulfilling it. You imagine that I ought to preach the Law, the same as you do, and that if the laws of Moses, which you claim to have kept, are not sufficient, I ought to bring to you a new and better law teaching good works, just as you set up many self-elected works in addition to God's Law, as though you had already fulfilled it.

9. But I am not telling you of new articles, laws or works, for those the Law enjoins are already more than you can do and keep. But I teach that you must become altogether different persons. My teaching is not concerning what you must do or not do, but concerning what you must become. It aims not at the performance of new works, but first at being born anew; not at a different life, but at a different birth. It will not do to put the end before the beginning, or alongside of it; to expect fruit before or as soon as there is a root. The tree must first be made new and there must be a good and proper root, if the fruits and works are to be good. It is not the hand and foot or their actions that must be changed, but the person, that is, the entire man. If this has not taken place, works are of no value and of no avail whatever and a person cannot see the kingdom of God; in other words, he must remain under the condemnation of sin and everlasting death.

10. This was, verily, strange and unheard-of preaching, and a rough and surly answer to our holy Nicodemus who had come to the Lord wellintentioned and thinking that he was in the right way. He had expected least of all that Christ would or could condemn his goodly life and his zeal in keeping the Law. On the contrary, he had hoped that Christ would have to praise them as an example to others, or that he would urge him to continue, or would suggest to him some other work which he was yet to do. Such he was prepared to hear and to do. And now he hears instead that Christ utterly rejects him

and condemns all his good and holy living, thus proceeding in an altogether absurd manner. He praises Christ as a good man; Christ in turn accosts him, saying: And you are a bad man. He gives honor to Christ and calls him a teacher come from God; Christ in turn tells him that both his doctrine and life are wrong and have already been ruled out of heaven. For what else is the meaning of his words than this: You are doing many beautiful works and imagine yourself to be holy and without reproach, so that you must needs please God. But I tell you, all that you have done in your past life, or that you may still do in this life, is lost labor and condemned in God's sight, and not only your works but also your heart and your entire nature – all that you are and all that you do. All must be put aside; the tree with its root and fruits must be cast out and burned, and a new tree must be created.

11. Thus, this first part of Christ's conversation with Nicodemus is nothing else than a real, sharp call to repentance. Christ, like a faithful preacher, takes pity on Nicodemus because he is so ignorant and still very far from the kingdom of God. Hence he curtly closes and denies heaven to him, yea, he condemns him and hands him over to the devil, stating that, as he now lives or may be able to live in the future, he can never enter the kingdom of God, but must be lost and remain in the power of the devil, of death and of hell. He does this in order that Nicodemus may be brought to a knowledge of self and attain to a genuine understanding and life before God. Penitential preaching of this sort is particularly needed by people like Nicodemus, who pursue their course in the righteousness of their own works and claim to be holy and righteous in the sight of God because they are blameless in the eyes of the world.

12. Thus, Christ always begins the preaching of the Gospel with this point: He first reveals and teaches that which no man's reason has gathered or known from the Law, namely, that all men in their natural state and life are condemned and under sin. St. Paul also proves this conclusively in the very beginning of his Epistle to the Romans. And this is the first sentence and conclusion here laid down that, in his natural state and with his every ability, man cannot fulfill the Law of God, though he may attempt to keep it; that keeping the Law does not mean doing its work outwardly, as far as human strength is able; and that, consequently, the Law cannot aid man to become holy in the sight of God nor save him from sin and everlasting wrath.

13. If this were in man's power and could be brought about in our nature by means of the Law, Christ could not say regarding all men, as he does here: "Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." That is certainly saying that man in his old nature, no matter to what eminent height he may attain by his gifts of reason, wisdom and virtue, cannot rid himself of sin nor of the power of death, nor can he please God. In short, there must be an entirely different being; that is, the entire person must be changed so as to obtain an altogether new mind and heart, and new thoughts and feelings.

14. Thus you see overthrown, as by a mighty thunderbolt, all the teaching and boasting of men who undertake to instruct people how to become righteous by the strength and works of human nature, or who would at least have works placed alongside of faith, and who claim that men must contribute something themselves toward their righteousness. For here you are clearly told that a person must be born anew or changed before he can see the kingdom of God or do anything to please God. Now, man surely cannot contribute anything to his birth by his own works; nay, before he can be active at all, his birth must have been accomplished. Then, since a new birth is demanded here, the works and activity of the old birth can never be of any value or aid; in fact, they are all rejected and condemned beforehand.

15. Nor can the claim stand that the works which follow the new birth contribute something toward our righteousness, for the new birth must have occurred before a person can be active by virtue of it; that is, one must first belong to the kingdom and to heaven before he begins to do works that are pleasing to God. But this point will be more fully explained by the following verses, in which Christ states the process of the new birth. We have here only the introduction, in which he overthrows the Pharisee's conceit and establishes the contrary doctrine. On hearing this Nicodemus becomes perplexed, and because he does not know what to make of Christ's words, he blurts out and says: "How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

16. He wishes to say: What a queer and absurd statement and teaching that is! Who ever heard of a person being born anew, or that it is at all possible to be born differently from the way in which one has been born? What do you mean by proposing and demanding such an impossible thing? If you wish to teach people, you must tell them something that a human being can do. This is the answer which the wisdom and reason of men return to the preaching of repentance and of the new birth, by which the Law receives its true glory. And, indeed, they must answer thus, because they do not know otherwise. Owing to that outward training in a holy life which a person can obtain by his own strength, provided he hear the Law, Nicodemus cannot endure to hear these things so commendable in the eyes of the world shall all be counted worthless and shall be condemned, especially since there are very few men who thus lead a beautiful and virtuous life. All the rulers of this world, intelligent, wise and great though they are, consider it harmful teaching to depreciate such a beautiful life, and on that account charge the Gospel with aiming to forbid good works etc.

17. However, by so doing, they testify to their own blindness and ignorance in these divine matters. Nicodemus, who passes for a teacher and instructor, by the confession of his own mouth seals his wisdom with greater foolishness, because he is dreaming about a natural birth from father and mother and imagines that he comprehends Christ's meaning and has effectually blocked his aim. Such is the corrupt habit of human reason, which ever assumes to pass judgment on the Word of God and to act as its tutor, though

is does not understand it. As if Christ, whom Nicodemus has to acknowledge a teacher come from God, were not wise enough himself to know that a person cannot be born again in physical birth, and that such a birth would not benefit him! And, indeed, Christ himself meets this conception. *“Jesus answered: Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”*

18. He means to say: You need not instruct me how to express myself. I know very well what! have said, and in order that you may know that a person does not enter the kingdom of God by his own ability, I say again that he must be born differently, or he cannot enter. However, I do not speak of natural birth, of one’s descent from father and mother, of which you are dreaming because you know of no other birth; but I am speaking of a different birth, a new birth, of water and the Spirit. You ‘certainly have heard me reject this very birth from father and mother by which you and all other men, Jews or not Jews, have been born. Even were! to grant this to be the meaning of a person’s new birth, still, a person might be born over again from his mother’s womb as many as a hundred times, and yet every new birth of this kind would not be different nor better than the former. The reason he declares as follows: *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”*

19. These are two clear sayings by which he overthrows the Pharisee’s conception and dream of a natural birth, and explains his opening remarks, in which he had stated that, unless a person receives a different birth, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. The term, “that which is born of the flesh,” defines all that man is, and is able to do, according to his human nature in its present state, since Adam. For the Scripture significance of “flesh” is the natural man, in his human sense, born from father and mother, as he lives, works, thinks, speaks, and acts, no matter when, how often, or of whom he is born, or whether he is called a Jew or a gentile. John 1:12 speaks of being born of blood, that is, born in the natural way, from the holy fathers, or obtaining birth through the will of man and therewith accepting membership among the people and children of God. All this is nothing but flesh, that is, it is void of the Spirit. However, to be void of the Spirit means nothing else than what he terms not being able to enter the kingdom of God, that is, being condemned in sin, under the wrath of God, to everlasting death.

20. This certainly is a curt, unvarnished, solemn and awful verdict on all men in their natural state. It lays down the conclusion that by the teaching and works of the Law, such works as man is able to do in accordance with it, no person becomes rid of sin nor is righteous in the sight of God, because his nature is not changed by works but remains what it was before. For this reason no person can, under the Law, enter the kingdom of God nor obtain life everlasting.

21. Again, he says: *“That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”* He calls “Spirit” that which God works in us above the ability of human nature, namely, such spiritual

knowledge, light and understanding as he reveals to us, to the end that we may know God, turn to him, lay hold of his grace, and cling to him. In order that man may receive these revelations, his heart must first be renewed and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, that he may learn to know God's will toward him and may understand the way to obtain grace and everlasting life.

22. The preaching and teaching of the Law alone cannot do this; it, indeed, demands works and obedience of us, but since these things are not possible to our nature, which is characteristic of the very reverse, the only effect of the Law, when correctly understood, is to make us guilty and to condemn us to everlasting hell under the wrath of God. And it is for this purpose that it must be preached, for it was given by God to the end that man should learn this truth first. Now, if man is not to remain under condemnation, but is to look to God for grace and comfort, the preaching of a different word must be added. We are here told that such word is the preaching and office of the Holy Spirit, revealed and brought down from heaven by Christ, the Son of God. Christ speaks of this office now and explains more fully later.

23. Thus there is shown us by this passage the reason for what the first part of this discourse has stated, namely, the reason why a person cannot enter the kingdom of God in the nature he has by birth, and why another birth is necessary, one which must be accomplished by the Holy Spirit. Christ rebukes here not only human ignorance and error, but he also begins to teach what the new birth is and how it takes place, although he does not here include all parts which belong to it, but shows, in the first place, only *causas efficientes*, the causes and means from which this new birth springs and by which it is effected. Later he will tell how it is acquired, and by whom; also the way to receive it. Therefore, we must look at these words a little more closely, so as to learn what being born of water and the Spirit means.

24. Note, in the first place, that he directs Nicodemus to the external ordinance in the Church, namely, to preaching and baptism, because he says that one must be born of water and the Spirit. He is speaking of the ordinance which had been introduced by John the Baptist, the forerunner and servant of Christ. The Pharisees and Nicodemus knew this very well, because they had seen it. By pointing him to this ordinance, Christ wishes to confirm the preaching and baptism of John as institutions that are to be in force and operation forever, and are appointed by God for the purpose of the new birth, and so it is that no one shall go to heaven who does not accept them or who despises them. It is as if he were to say: If you wish to see the kingdom of God at all, you will all have to accept this very preaching and baptism that John practiced, and which you Pharisees were unwilling to accept because you would not suffer yourselves to be reproved by him and were offended at his new and unheard of preaching against your holiness by the Law. All your Mosaical and legal washings, purification's, sacrifices, worship and holiness will be of no help nor benefit to you. You can enter the kingdom

of heaven and be saved in no other way than by this ordinance which preaches Christ and baptizes in his name.

25. This ordinance he magnifies by stating that it is the office and work of the Holy Spirit, by which a person is born anew; that it is not simply baptizing with water, but that the Holy Spirit also is present. A person thus baptized, is baptized not with water only, but with the Holy Ghost. The presence of the Spirit could not be claimed for any other washings and baptisms with water, such as the ceremonial washings of the Jews, else a new baptism would not have been necessary; and it could not be claimed that another means aside from the Mosaical Law and form of worship was necessary for a person's new birth of the Spirit. The reason is plainly this, because through the Mosaical ceremonies the Holy Spirit is not bestowed and does not act.

26. Thus he shows that there is no other means by which a person is born anew and enters the kingdom of God than the office of preaching and baptism, and that the Holy Spirit is connected with this office and by its means operates in the hearts of men. He does not speak of the Spirit in his hidden and unknown qualities, such as he is in his divine person and essence, without the means by which he has revealed himself, but of the Spirit as revealed in the external ordinance, by which he is heard and seen, namely, by the office of Gospel preaching and the administration of the Sacrament. God does not intend to come and act through his Holy Spirit secretly and privily, nor deal with each individual in a particular manner; in that case, who could know for certain where and how to seek and find the Holy Spirit? But he has ordained that the Holy Spirit shall be revealed to the ears and eyes of men by the Word and Sacrament, and shall be active through this external ordinance, so that men may know that the effects which there take place are truly caused by the Holy Spirit.

27. Therefore, the words "Except one be born anew of water and the Spirit," are equivalent to saying, A person must be born anew by the preaching of the Gospel and the ordinance of baptism, by which the Holy Spirit operates. For by means of the Word he enlightens the heart and reveals God's wrath against sin; and, on the other hand, by showing us the grace of God which has been promised for the sake of his Son, Christ, he so kindles our hearts that we begin to believe and soon turn to God, take comfort from his grace and call upon him. And in order to rouse and strengthen our faith he adds baptism as a sure sign, along with the Word, to show that he washes away and blots out our sin and promises at all times firmly to keep for us this grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit which he has promised us. Of this more shall be said at another time.

28. Observe from this text how Christ in plain words ascribes to baptism, which he calls water, such glory and power as to say that the Holy Spirit is present in it, and that by its means a person is born anew. By this statement all false doctrines and errors against the doctrine of faith and baptism are overthrown. Among them, in the first place, is that of the papists, and others like them, who seek to obtain righteousness and salvation by

their own works. For you are told here that a person's own merit and holiness, which he possesses by his old birth from flesh and blood, or has achieved by following his own choice and imagination, are insufficient and avail nothing toward this end. There must be a new birth by holy baptism, toward which man can contribute nothing himself, but through the will and grace of God the Holy Spirit is bestowed by means of the preaching of the Word and by water, which act as father and mother at this new birth by which one becomes a new, pure and holy person and an heir to heaven.

29. In the second place, the pretense of the Anabaptists and kindred sects is here overthrown, who teach people to seek the Spirit outside of and without the Word and Sacraments, by special revelations and operations from heaven, without means etc. Yea, they despise blessed baptism, considering it no more than mere useless water. Hence they are in the habit of saying blasphemously: What can a handful of water benefit the soul? However, Christ says clearly that the Holy Spirit is present with this water, and states that a person must be born anew of this water. He certainly refers to real, natural water, such as John used and as he commanded his disciples to use when baptizing. Therefore St. Paul in Ephesians 5:26, calls baptism a washing of water by which the Church of Christ is cleansed, and in Titus 3:5, he calls baptism the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.

30. Yea, Christ so orders his words in this passage as to place at the head "*water*" and *after it the "Spirit,"* to indicate that we must not look for the Spirit without and outside of the external means, but know that the Spirit intends to operate in, through, and with the external means and ordinance. Hence both must remain united, and a person must be born anew, of water, by the Holy Spirit, or of the Holy Spirit with and by water. Aside from this instance, it is quite true that, if there were water only without the Spirit, there would be no greater effects than in other water and washings, and there certainly would not result a new birth. For this reason, this birth is called a birth, not of water only, but also of the Spirit, besides and with the water. The Holy Spirit acting at this birth is the male, and the water is the female part, or mother.

31. Moreover, you gather from these words that baptism is not such an unnecessary thing as the sect of the Anabaptists blasphemously claims, stating that one can easily omit it or put it off till old age; or gabbling that baptism is of no benefit to infants, merely because they do not understand how it can be. There is here a plain saying which includes all men in this divine ordinance, namely, that all who wish to enter the kingdom of God must be born anew of water and the Spirit. Hence, it will not do at all to despise this matter, or to put it off, for that would be willfully despising and setting aside the ordinance of God. Such an action, indeed, could not be taken with the guidance of the Holy Ghost. Moreover, it is certain that Christ does not exclude infants in this passage, but they are embraced in it, and if they are to enter the kingdom of God, baptism is to be communicated and administered to them. He assuredly would have them born anew and desires to operate in them. In another place he commands that they

shall be brought to him and says that of such as are brought is the kingdom of heaven. Now, if they are to come to Christ, they must not be denied the means and symbols by which Christ operates in them.

32. But this I say of the common ordinance and rule, which ought to be observed wherever and whenever baptism can be obtained. In an extreme case, where it cannot be obtained, there must be exceptions, just as in similar cases of necessity; then the desire to be baptized must suffice, and the person must be brought to Christ and offered to him on the strength of his Word. Of this matter I do not wish to speak further at present. Now, this is what Christ has stated regarding regeneration by the baptism of water and the Spirit. He continues: *“Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born anew. The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.”*

33. It seems a marvelous and rare saying to Nicodemus, the wise, intelligent, holy Pharisee, that his work and holiness, and that of all men as well, is so utterly rejected that it is of no avail in the sight of God; that he must let go of it all, no matter how many and how great things he may have accomplished in his life; and that he must become another man. There is really nothing better of which Nicodemus has knowledge or that he understands how to do. Also, he is directed preeminently to this ordinance, in which nothing is done or seen except the external ceremony of baptizing one with water, and the hearing of the Word; and he is to believe that through the reception of these such a change takes place in one that he is born anew and becomes pure, holy and righteous in the sight of God, all of which blessings cannot be attained in any way by human work and ability. Alas! he muses, how is this possible? What can be accomplished by such an insignificant matter as being baptized or bathed with water? Is it not a matter of far higher merit to exercise one's self with great earnestness and diligence in good works and holy worship according to the Law and to shine in the splendor of a beautiful, upright life and of great virtue? Can you name and extol anything nobler and better in all the world?

34. While the Pharisee is thus musing and wondering, Christ replies, explaining to him by a parable what he had said about the new birth of water and the Spirit; he tells him that this matter is not to be considered by the rule of reason, which has regard to the brilliancy of meritorious works and exemplary life and admires them, imagining that they must be as commendatory in the sight of God as in its own estimation. My dear Nicodemus, he says, I will tell you how this takes place: Your conception of the matter is not the right one; you view it as you would anything perceptible to the senses or to reason. But this is a matter which is beyond the fathom of human reason and thought, and it is accomplished in man by the Holy Spirit.

35. Its process in the heart is similar to the phenomenon of the wind, which blows and blusters when and where it will, and passes through all that grows and moves and lives

in creation. In the case of the wind there is no more than a breath or air, which lies still for a while but suddenly begins to move, to blow and rush, and you do not know whence it comes. Now it blows here, now there, producing all kinds of sudden changes of weather, and yet you cannot see it nor conceive what it is; you only hear it rushing. You notice its presence, its stir and motion upon the water or in the fields of corn, but you cannot tell, when it strikes you, when or where or at what distance from you it took its start and how far beyond you it will stop blowing, nor can you appoint time, space and measure for its coming and going. In brief, it is in no man's power at all to bind and rule the wind, to start or to calm it; it moves freely, of its own accord, and does its work without let or hindrance, when, where, and in what manner it pleases. No man can do ought in this matter, nor discover the process and origin, but as Psalm 135:7 says, God brings it out of his treasuries and secret places, which no man knows beforehand, nor can discover.

36. "So is every one," he says, "that is born of the Spirit." You must not stand gaping to see great and excellent works of specious holiness which strike the eye. You must not attempt to estimate and grasp these spiritual matters with your reason and according to the Law and external aspect, examining what great works the person is doing who is entitled to be called a person born anew and an heir of heaven, and how he is living and conducting himself. This matter cannot be thus grasped and comprehended, nor can it be pictured and represented in such a manner that we could say: Behold that person; he is a pious Jew and, moreover, a Pharisee who keeps the Law with great earnestness and diligence, hence he is a living saint and a child of God etc. But this new birth which begets children of God, or righteousness in the sight of God, is quite a different thing. It takes place in one's heart, not by a person's own choice or action – for that is all flesh and cannot see the kingdom of God – but by the word of the Gospel, which reveals to the heart both the wrath of God against men – inducing repentance – and his grace through the Mediator, Christ, for the consolation and peace of their conscience in the sight of God.

37. No peculiar or glorious manifestation, indeed, will be seen outwardly in this exalted and supreme work, for there is nothing required for it but the Word and water, which we hear and perceive, and yet the power and efficacy of the Holy Spirit is present, kindling and quickening the heart unto true fear of God, true confidence and comfort in his grace, and also unto true prayer, thus renewing the heart and causing a person who receives the Word into his heart to overcome God's wrath, and sin, death, the flesh and the world, to turn to God sincerely and to conceive a desire and love for everything good.

38. These are genuine, living works of the Holy Spirit, far greater and more glorious than the righteousness of man's works, which latter possess indeed a great glamour, and are much vaunted in the eyes of men, but are merely dead things, powerless to change in any wise the heart, and which are not followed by genuine and unfailing comfort, and

transformation of life. Man, in his own righteousness, remains in the old carnal state of mind, without repentance, in unbelief and doubt, in secret contempt, disobedience, hatred of and enmity against God. This is afterward evident in the real conflict and terror of conscience, where actual flight from God, despair and finally impatience and blasphemy against God, ensue.

39. Such are the genuine fruits of the great and beautiful holiness of Pharisees. Their holiness is without the knowledge of Christ and without faith, and yet claims to be righteous and holy by the rule of the Law. In the end, the great and knotty problem arises which Paul in Romans 7:13 calls sin aroused by the Law. Sin is made exceedingly sinful by it; that is, it is made great and grievous, submerging a person and causing him to perish in everlasting death. Yet, previously, that same sin and hidden malice of the heart was for a while covered with the outward show of great and holy works in obedience to the Law, permitting the person to live secure in his carnal mind and, as St. Paul says, without the Law, that is, without a genuine knowledge and perception of sin and, hence, also utterly without the Spirit.

40. On the other hand, wherever the Holy Spirit is present he effects a new heart and mind in one, who no longer flees from God but, though he knows and acknowledges that he has sinned and merited God's wrath, still takes comfort from the grace of Christ, which Christ has promised and proclaimed by the Word of God to those who repent and believe. Thus one obtains a childlike heart toward God as his dear Father, and can cheerfully come before him and call upon him by faith in the Mediator, Christ.

41. Such a new heart and life, I say, is wrought in one by the Holy Spirit through no other outward or visible means than through the Word and baptism, though these produce no external show whatever. It is effected inwardly, before the least change can be seen in a person, and yet Christ says that it truly is, and is called, a birth of the Spirit. Reason and human wisdom cannot comprehend how so significant a work should be accomplished by things apparently so very insignificant. Though reason hears, still it does not believe. Nicodemus, too, is still more startled, wondering at these words, and is rebuked by Christ because he wants to grasp the matter with his reason and not to believe it.

42. We have, accordingly, in this parable a beautiful picture which clearly presents to our eyes the process of this new birth. In the first place, there is the external office of the Word and the power which the Holy Spirit exerts through it. As there are in the wind these two features – the blowing, which is the wind itself, and the sound, which is heard without, though the blowing is not seen nor felt except by the person who receives the force of the wind – in like manner there are two features in the new birth; namely, the Word, which is a physical sound that one hears, and the Spirit, who operates with and by the Word. This power is not seen nor felt by anyone except him whom the Spirit seizes, and yet it certainly occurs wherever the external Word and baptism are agents. The Spirit, accordingly, can be seen and apprehended bodily, as it

were, in this external institution, which provides us with a certain sign indicating where we are to look for him and where he operates, although the inward power is concealed to human eyes.

43. Accordingly, as I have stated, you must not understand these words “born of the Spirit” as referring to the Holy Spirit in his invisible and incomprehensible divine essence in heaven, but to the manner in which he must be known and apprehended in the Church here on earth, in the Word and symbols. Hence, where these things are heard and seen one may say: There you hear and see the Holy Spirit. Just as you say of the blowing of the wind: There you hear and see the wind. In brief, all that is accomplished by the office of the Word and baptism must be declared to be effected by the Holy Spirit. Just as Christ in our text calls that person born of the Spirit who has received the Word and baptism or as he says elsewhere, who believes and is baptized, etc. Mark 16:16.

44. In the second place, this parable aptly shows that Christianity is not bound up in external affairs, places, persons, garments and other things, such as the outward holiness of the Jews required. A Christian is set up in the liberty of the Spirit, rid of the Law and all its bonds. He cannot be bound and made captive by any sort of laws, rules or works that may be proposed to him with a view of his becoming righteous through their efficacy in the sight of God. (We are not speaking now Of his outward life, in which he may keep all laws, provided, however, it is done without injury and damage to his spiritual liberty of mind and conscience.) Hence, by faith in the Word and in his baptism he remains a free man, superior to all laws, because he has through Christ forgiveness of sin, the grace of God and the Holy Spirit, and governs his entire life accordingly. Through the Holy Spirit, who operates in his heart, he is now become righteous, and has been quickened into life, and, except as the Holy Spirit by the Word guides and directs him, he does not look for other teaching regarding works of holiness.

45. Hence, as Christ here states, Christianity is like the wind which blows where it will, and yet no one sees or knows whence it comes and whither it goes, through what distance or extent it passes. In like manner, the Spirit in a Christian cannot be confined by rules and teachings, nor can it be determined by reason, but it must be untutored and unjudged by everybody, as St. Paul states in 1 Corinthians 2:15. It is not felt, heard and manifested outwardly except in the Word and in its proclamation, by which everybody must be governed, without regard to the persons of men who preach it, no matter how great and holy they are; the only requirement is that they exercise the office and Word of the Spirit aright.

46. However, it is and always will be strange, a thing at which human wisdom will be offended and scandalized, that such a significant, sublime, divine work should be accomplished in so humble and mean a way, by the puny voice of a poor mortal who utters only these words: I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of

the Holy Spirit; and again: By the command of the Lord Christ I announce to thee the forgiveness of sins, etc. There is nothing in these acts but the breath or sound of the words which strike the ear, and yet these great things are claimed to be accomplished by it, namely, that you are cleansed from sins, saved from everlasting death, quickened and made a new-born child of God.

47. Much pain and labor are involved before a person is naturally born into this world; ten months he must lie in his mother's womb, and afterwards both mother and infant are in extreme danger of losing their lives in the birth which ushers man into only this miserable mortal life. But in this case of the new birth it is so easy and so soon accomplished that no work could be easier. There is only the Word spoken to one and he is baptized with water, and yet the effect – provided only the heart lays hold by faith – is so significant that the person in that moment is born to everlasting life and snatched out of everlasting death and hell.

48. However, it is part of the perverse arrogance of reason that it wants, in so momentous a matter, to decide and to pass judgment, according to its conceptions, its way of looking at the matter, and after the standard of greatness as it appeals to the senses, refusing to regard the will of God and to recognize his ordinance, when he has issued his word of command in this matter, and hence it is he who is himself preaching, baptizing and operating through the external means. Divine results would necessarily follow, even if he were to produce them through external means still more insignificant. That is the reason why Christ so harshly assails and rebukes Nicodemus, who undertakes to form his judgment here on the ground of his wisdom. *“Nicodemus answered and said to him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou the teacher of Israel, and understandest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.”*

49. Here you can see how into Nicodemus' comprehension has utterly failed to enter what Christ had stated regarding the new birth by baptism and had explained by means of a parable, namely, that the true spiritual character of this matter could not be seen with the eye nor judged, determined and grasped, as Nicodemus wished to do, by the wisdom and understanding which he possessed from the teaching of the Law. He is so confounded by Christ's reply that he steps back forthwith, and cannot help being offended at Jesus because the latter proposes what, in his opinion, is an absurd idea. His attitude is as if to say: Is only this single act of baptizing a man with water to be of value, and shall the Law, which God has explicitly commanded us to keep and which he has 'confirmed with great signs, be pronounced worthless and void? How is it possible that your baptism is such a momentous affair when a person cannot see at all its effects?

50. Before finishing the discourse which he had begun, Christ returns a scathing and solemn answer, in order to show Nicodemus his ignorance and to rebut his carnal

notion. Why, he says, you are a teacher of Israel, that is, a person whose duty it is to teach and govern the people of God, and are you so utterly ignorant of these things? Is it not a shame that you who have been appointed to instruct and wish to be extolled as teacher of other people, possess no true perception whatever of these divine things? In what respect are you better than heathen, who are not the people of God and have not God's Word? For you have no knowledge except that of human works of holiness, such as intelligent and wise men among the heathen also teach. You are utterly ignorant of the teaching which ought to be common knowledge in the Church, regarding Christ, the kingdom of God, and authentic spiritual things. And yet you have the Word of God abundantly in Moses and the Scriptures. You ought to teach the people from the Law to know the wrath of God against their sin, and, in consequence, to seek grace by faith in the promise of Christ. Instead you have perverted everything; you have no knowledge nor experience of genuine repentance, and yet you parade your holiness, secure and insolent, confirming yourselves and others in contempt of God and in unbelief, and with all this, you are dreaming about a Messiah who shall crown you for your Jewish holiness and give you the dominion of the world. Such things you do who pretend to be the foremost people on earth, and by so doing you go farther away from the kingdom of God and merit for yourselves more grievous punishment than others, even manifest sinners. who are more easily instructed and converted than you who pose as great saints.

51. That I call reading him a good, sharp lesson. However, it is done in a friendly spirit, because Christ is talking to a person who, unlike the rest, is not stubbornly despising Christ; and this admonition is necessary in order that he may show Nicodemus the way out of his ignorance, and to rouse his attention to instruction on the subject of how he is to enter the kingdom of God and heaven. Accordingly, he proceeds: *“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, we speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen,”* etc.

52. You who pretend to be teachers have no knowledge and understanding of things which should be understood by everyone in that society of men called the people of God. And yet, you refuse to believe the teachings which are apparent from the Word and testimony of God, and you judge simply according to your notions. No, it will not do that with your blind and uncertain conceptions you should act as tutors in the things of our definite teaching and testimony, and that you dispute their truth. How much will a pupil learn who starts out by questioning the correctness of his master's teaching and wanting to be master himself before he has begun to learn? If you have no knowledge and understanding, you must not pass judgment and pretend to be smart in this matter. If you have not seen these things, we have – John and all my prophets; and we are not offering you uncertain fancies, such as a person spins out of his own head, but the doctrine which God has revealed and has had witnessed by the Holy Spirit. It is useless for you to try to accept this doctrine by your reason, or to grasp, to see with your eyes, to feel, how this new birth of man takes place, in the same way that you behold and

grasp your works of external worship. You must lock up your reason and open only your ears and your heart, and believe what God's Word tells you, which Word we have surely received from God with the command to teach and to testify unto it.

53. If you wish to know which is the way, listen: You must believe and receive the Word, and let go of your notions which undertake to comprehend and encompass matters that no reason can understand nor attain unto. Else what need would there be of teaching God's Word which I have heard and received from the Father, as also John and the prophets have received it by divine revelation from the Holy Spirit and have borne witness unto it? Thus St. Peter in his Second Epistle 2 Peter 1:21, says that no prophecy ever came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke, being moved by the Holy Spirit. For this reason he commands that nothing is to be taught in the Church except that which we know for certain to be God's Word, not what seems good and right to human reason and wisdom.

54. Therefore, Christ very properly rebukes his Jewish teachers who would rule and instruct men's consciences in the matter of their relation to God without certain testimony from God's Word, and who would harmonize their teaching with human reason. The result of such practice leaves the hearer in doubt and uncertainty, confused with heathenish notions of men and never arriving at the true knowledge and experience of the truth. *"If I told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you heavenly things?"*

55. I have hitherto told you of earthly things – how a person must be born of water and the Spirit, that is, how the Spirit operates through the external office of the Word and of baptism – things which you can see and grasp with your understanding. You have heard my doctrine expressed in a parable, in a figure of things familiar to you, and you are forced to confess that I have spoken correctly. Now, if you are unwilling to believe the things presented to you in a material way, much less will you be able to believe if I tell you of things not earthly but heavenly and pertaining to the counsel of God, which no one knows except God alone and he who comes from heaven, namely, the Son of God. Whoever wishes to comprehend in any measure the things of heaven must hear and believe him alone who is come from heaven, and who has seen and who testifies of these things. He says: *"And no one hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended out of heaven, even the Son of man, who is in heaven?"*

56. Here he begins to speak of infinite and heavenly matters – of the secret, eternal, unspeakable counsel and will which God framed in eternity. And thus he completes the second part of this discourse regarding the new birth, that is, how a sinful person becomes righteous, a child of God and an heir of heavenly and eternal life; whence baptism has such power and by whom it has been acquired and merited; also how it must be received. And he now begins to speak of himself as the Messiah promised and sent by God, God's Son and his office and work. Of these things the Pharisees were in

utter ignorance, things which seemed far more strange to them than those he had already told them. They could not at all conceive that their Messiah had to be sent from heaven that he might redeem and propitiate all the world, and particularly his own Jewish people, who were condemned and lost, under the wrath of God, and this notwithstanding they had the Law and the ceremonial of Moses. Much less did they understand that he had to die on the cross, that he must be crucified and become a sacrifice for their sins and the sins of the whole world, and that his dominion was not to be in the nature of an earthly kingdom. To be told these things was utterly offensive and intolerable to them. The reason was because they failed to recognize that the whole nature of man in the sight of God merited only damnation and perdition; and because, in their holiness, they regarded themselves as being without sin, or were so bold as to imagine that they could put away and atone for their sins by their own good works and so would need no Messiah, but only one who would deliver them from their temporal bondage and foreign oppression and who would avenge them upon their enemies.

57. Christ's words mean: My dear Nicodemus, withdraw your thoughts entirely from your own legal righteousness and holiness, and that of all other men, and be careful not to try to enter the kingdom of God by their merit. All ability of men, no matter how wise, learned and holy they are, is of no avail. It is determined with God from the beginning that no man can enter heaven as he is descended from Adam.

58. Yea, there has never been a saint who in his own merit could go to heaven, no matter who he was, whether Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, John or any other. None of these was distinguished as worthy to enter heaven – to reconcile God, to take away sin and death, to merit eternal life for himself and others. But before man can reach heaven, that is, enter the kingdom of God and receive eternal life, there must first come from heaven One who has eternal righteousness and life in himself, who is able to appease God's anger and to abolish sin and death. He must be the Mediator by whom we, too, may enter heaven. Yea, for this very purpose One had to come down from heaven and, for our sakes, become flesh and blood like we are; that is, he had to take upon himself our misery and sin.

59. With these words Christ directs us to himself as the point of all that he had said before regarding the new birth and the kingdom of God, that it may be manifest that no one can avail himself of these things except through him and for his sake. Without him, it would be in vain that man should even desire to be delivered from his old birth, to be renewed by the Spirit, and to become pure. For had not One first obtained for us these things no one could have realized them. Nor would there be any virtue in holy baptism and the Spirit if they were not bestowed through him and for his sake. Accordingly, the point on which all now depends is that this person, by whom we, too, may be saved, must be known and apprehended. This fact he sets forth in conclusion.

60. It is thus that he pictures his own person: He is the promised Savior come from heaven, that is, he is the true Son of God from eternity; for if he is come from heaven he must have been with God in eternity. But he is descended from heaven, not as an angel who appears and after a while disappears again, but he has taken upon himself the nature of man and, as John 1:14 says, has dwelt among us on earth. For this reason he here calls himself the Son of man, that is, actual man, having flesh and blood like we have.

61. The signification of this descent of the Son of man is that he has cast himself down into our misery and affliction, that he has taken upon himself our sins and made himself a sacrifice to the everlasting wrath of God which we had merited by our sins. To this he alludes when he here says that he must be exalted. Now, since this man comes down from heaven, personally he must be without any sin whatsoever, innocent and of divine purity. It cannot be said of him that he was born of flesh, as we are, but of the Holy Ghost; and his flesh is not sinful flesh and blood, but is pure and holy. All this was wrought to the end that he might be able to make our sinful flesh and blood pure and holy by his purity and his holy, immaculate sacrifice.

62. But what do these words import: "*The Son of man, who is in heaven?*" How is it that he has descended from heaven and is still in heaven? Did he not first ascend in the clouds on the fortieth day after his resurrection? True, he descended into our flesh and blood and humbled himself below all men, unto death on the cross, as a man forsaken and accursed by God. However, he was not in the meantime separated from God, but he remained with God all the time and hence was always in heaven; he exists from eternity, ever beholding his Father and present with him, ruling and working together with him, co-equal in power and might. These features of his omnipotence were not in any wise apparent in his humbled state, when he divested himself of the form of God, as Paul says in Philippians 2:7, and went about in the form of a servant, enduring suffering and death, until such time as he was delivered from this state and was exalted again and sat down at the right hand of God, having now been made Lord over death and hell and all elements of his human nature. All this he has manifested by his visible ascension when he was taken up in the clouds before the eyes of his disciples, and in the same visible manner he shall return and be seen by all men.

63. That is the explanation of the record that the Son of man descended and ascended and at the same time remained in heaven in divine essence and power, and in eternal communion with the Father. He does not have reference to a material change of place but to a spiritual removal from humiliation to exaltation, from his suffering and death to his resurrection and heavenly communion with the Father, in which he is not restricted by material conditions. His divinity and communion with the Father he has had from eternity and has continued in possession of them all the time, even from the moment he took upon himself the limitations of his human nature. "*And as Moses lifted up the*

serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth may in him have eternal life.”

64. Here he shows how we may also enter heaven; that is, he shows what he has done for us and how we are to receive and become partakers of his blessing. With these words he proclaims the grand work of redemption, which was decreed by God in his eternal counsel and which, therefore, had so to be accomplished out of the unutterable and fathomless love of God toward the human race, who would not that it should perish (as we have heard in the Gospel for Pentecost Monday, which follows soon after these words). Since there was not elsewhere any help or redress, any expedient for appeasing his eternal wrath against sin, any hope of redeeming men from everlasting death by the agency of any creature in heaven or earth, the only Son of God had to take our place and become a sacrifice for our sin, thereby to appease God’s wrath and make payment for us. This work now is our salvation and comfort and the power that is operative in baptism to the end that we may become new-born men and enter heaven.

65. This is the teaching: His ascending and descending and his being in heaven pertain to himself, and do not help us. They are his prerogatives and no one can do the same. However, he says: I have all things in my power and dwell in heaven above, yet I do not wish to ascend alone, but to draw men upward with me; they could not otherwise ascend, but if they cling to me it shall be accomplished. I shall suffer myself to be crucified and shall rise. Those who believe that I have died for them, I shall draw after me, although they cannot enter heaven by their own strength. Thus he places us on his shoulders and bears us up to the place to which he ascends. Hence, our salvation is not by our strength, but by that of another. With these words all our works are rejected once more.

66. Now, he introduces a beautiful allegory from Numbers 21:6-9, which aptly depicts Christ. When the Jews were journeying in the desert, the way being long and bread and water failing, they murmured against Moses and became very impatient. Then it was that God sent fiery serpents among them, which bit the people. In the countries toward the South there are great deserts, where no food nor drink is found, and there are also multitudes of noxious vermin. The serpents on this occasion were a particularly vicious kind, for their bite caused such fever and such an unquenchable thirst that people had to die. For this reason they are called fiery serpents, such as the Greeks called Dipsades. There may, however, be another reason for the term, for we read that some of the serpents in those countries are so fiery that when they hiss or give forth breath, there issues, as it were, sheer fire from them.

67. On account of this cruel affliction of the Jews there was much pitiful crying and calling among the people to Moses, but he could give no advice until God took pity upon them and said to Moses: Make thee a brazen serpent, like those which are biting the people, and set it upon a standard. Every one that is bitten, when he seeth it, shall

live. *“And Moses,” so the story runs, “made a serpent of brass and set it upon the standard, and it came to pass that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he looked unto the serpent of brass, he lived.”*

68. Behold now, how Christ has been typified in this story. In the first place, the main point is that the Jews, when bitten by serpents, could find no aid nor remedy until they were helped by looking at such a simple thing as the brazen serpent. This serpent had the appearance of a real serpent, but it was dead and without venom, yea, it was salutary. Not that the brass could help them; what made it efficient was the fact that there was affixed to it God’s order and this promise: Whoever is bitten and looks at the serpent, shall live. This word was wrapped about the serpent, and by virtue of it the serpent helped the people.

69. Now, Christ makes application to himself and says: “As Moses lifted up the serpent, even so must the Son of man be lifted up” etc. This is the true explanation and interpretation of this allegory, or figure: We, too, have been stung or bitten by the deadly fang of the devil, which is sin. As St. Paul says, sin is a fiery, poisonous bite, or sting. If the poison enters the conscience, there is never any rest. Sin hurls against us and sets upon us death; death drives man, causing him to feel that he is in a veritable hell. And there is no help nor redress. You may do as many works as you please, you are condemned, nevertheless, until this miracle of grace arrives for you; that is, another serpent is raised up which is not poisonous nor harmful and has only the form of a serpent.

70. But why does Christ not choose a different symbol? Why that of the serpent by which men had been bitten? Surely, he might have chosen some other figure. The reason is stated by St. Paul in Romans 8:3: *De peccato damnavit peccatum*. For sin he condemned sin. He has driven out death by death: he has overcome the Law by the Law. How has he done this? Christ was made a sinner upon the cross, bearing the title of an arch fiend in the midst of knaves. He suffered the judgment and punishment which a sinner must suffer. He was innocent, he never committed any sin; yet, the name of a sinner and the guilt and punishment verily settled upon him, and thus he has abolished sin by taking upon himself the sin which was not his, and by suffering himself to be judged and condemned as a malefactor.

71. Now, although he is indeed innocent, nevertheless he is like unto a sinner, and there is in him a salutary sin, by which he means to save us, who are truly sinners, from the deadly poison. He has condemned sin upon the cross; for sin wronged him when it condemned him and inflicted death upon him. For this reason he now obtains authority over the sin of the whole world and rightly and justly condemns sin, because it tried to condemn him. Accordingly, he now pronounces to all who believe, this verdict of justice in place of their sin: Sin shall not harm you; for it is become amenable to me

and owes me penitence. Therefore it shall either be no sin, or else a sin that has been sentenced.

72. Now, the conclusion which Christ draws is expressed thus: “That whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” That is saying as much as was said in regard to the serpent: “Whoever looks unto it shall live.” To look unto Christ crucified is to believe on him. By that act sin is canceled and cannot hurt us; or, if it does hurt us, it shall cause no harm. Accordingly, all depends on looking unto Jesus and not on any work. However, while on the former occasion looking was a physical action, looking in this instance is performed spiritually, in the heart, by believing that Christ by his innocence has destroyed sin.

73. Now, Christ might have died upon the cross a thousand times and we would have been helped just as little as the Israelites would have been helped by raising a thousand serpents of their own accord, if this word of promise had not been issued, namely, as is written: “Whosoever believeth on him shall not perish” etc. This word appropriates and applies to us these blessings and makes us certain that we shall reach heaven; that is, certain that for the sake of this exalted and crucified Christ we shall obtain the grace of God and victory over the power of sin, death and hell, and shall receive eternal life, if we believe on him and are thus borne upward clinging to him.

74. Behold, this is the allegory which faithfully depicts to us the misery and need of our entire human nature, and the office of redemption of Christ our Lord, and the manner of obtaining these blessings we have been discussing. It shows how all men were mortally wounded by the fiery, hellish poison of the devil, and no remedy nor aid could have been procured for them if the Son of God had not been given and had not appeared for this purpose, that he might destroy the works of the devil, as 1 John 3:8 states. And this he did, not by a display of the great power, force and might of his divine majesty, but in the greatest weakness and infirmity, by his suffering and dying, when he hung upon the cross, an accursed, noxious worm. But there is a salutary death in the form of this dead serpent; it brings to all who, by their sins, have been poisoned and tainted unto eternal death, a healing balm by means of which they recover and are saved forever.

75. It is very strange to say and to believe that this salvation is achieved utterly without human co-operation. Yon poor Israelites who had to lie among the fiery serpents were not helped at all, though they tried every remedy that they could secure; they only grew worse the more they labored and the longer they strove to defend themselves against the serpents. And at last, when they had despaired of all help and there was no more comfort and hope, no other plan is proposed to them than this, that they must have raised among them just such a serpent, made of brass – a sight that might have terrified and awed them still more! – and must lift their eyes unto this serpent. And yet, it came to pass that whoever obeyed this word of God recovered forthwith and remained unharmed thereafter.

76. So, in this instance, whoever desires to obtain unfailing aid and salvation against sin and eternal death must hear and follow this strange counsel of God, letting go of every other comfort and endeavor, and must fix his heart upon this Christ alone, who has borne our sins and death in his own body. For it is settled that for our salvation no other name under heaven shall avail except that of Christ crucified. Acts 4:12.

77. Thus, Christ has delivered the entire discourse concerning the new birth, or the righteousness of man in the sight of God, going through all the parts which must needs be taught in this connection, namely, whence and by what means it is effected and how it is obtained. He has instructed us concerning the Word, baptism and the Spirit who works through these means; concerning the merit and sacrifice of Christ, for whose sake the grace of God and eternal life are given us; and concerning faith, by which we appropriate these blessings. Accordingly, you must now so retain the thread of this entire discourse that the end shall agree with the beginning. When you are asked: How does the new birth take place, in which the Spirit through the water and the Word makes a person a child of God? you must answer: In the way that Christ has here stated – it takes place when, over and against the terror on account of your sin, you grasp this comfort, the belief that Christ, the Son of God, is come from heaven for your sake and has been raised upon the cross for you, in order that you should not perish but have eternal life. This faith is the chest, or shrine, which holds the treasure of the forgiveness of sins and the heritage of eternal life, and man is saved by it; as Christ says, “Thy faith hath made thee whole” etc.

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