

We bow our hearts in prayer: Dearest heavenly Father, You are great in love and good works. Mercifully keep us focused on Your Son, Jesus Christ, as the source of our unity and peace so that His love for us produces the proper love, unity and peace among us and those in Your Church. Amen.

... We read as follows in Jesus' name:

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know His will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. ^(ESV)

This is Your Word, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen. ^(John 17:17)

Dear fellow redeemed

What is it that makes for Christian Unity and Peace?

What is it in the Church? In the home?

It is natural for us to initially consider our behavior and the rules and laws that govern them.

We just sang about the *earthly paradise* we would have if we *agreed to banish every kind of malice, falsehood and disguise* ^(stz. 4), *resentment, hate and cruel jests, ... and all that causes strife,* ^(stz. 3)

and instead let *love and charity dwell* in our hearts, ^(stz. 3)
observing the rule: to others do as you would have them do to you. ^(stz. 2)

But if this is all it takes, why hasn't there been a Christian society who lived in a paradise here?

God knows that this has been the desire of Christian throughout the ages.

Even those Christians of the OT who believed and were waiting for Jesus Christ to be born strove toward this end.

But you know what ends up happening in all of these societies?

They begin to focus on the law as a means to maintain Christian unity.

They end up emphasizing the correct Christian behavioral standards of the community and lose their focus on the Gospel of Christ's forgiveness that actually unifies us.

This is what St. Paul was speaking about in our text.

Throughout his ministry, he constantly dealt with this issue of people trying to maintain

the appearance of unity through an emphasis on the Law, what we call "legalism." In much of St. Paul's discussion on this, it was dealing with Jews who tried to hold the NT Christians to the OT ceremonial laws that had already been fulfilled by Christ. We see this clearly in our text where St. Paul talks about circumcision and uncircumcision. Some Jewish Christians were maintaining that Gentile Christians had to be circumcised in order to be legitimate Christians.

St. Paul indicates that those pushing for circumcision were not doing so for genuine concern. Instead he chastises them for proudly boasting in their Jewish heritage, as if they were superior Christians over and above the Gentile Christians. They relied on their OT understanding of the Law, thinking it to be something that can be completed by normal man. They arrogantly thought that their superior knowledge of the Scriptures made them teachers of the new Gentile Christians on how to be truly Christian.

But while St. Paul would never chastise anyone for knowing Scripture well (& even expects it), he reprimanded them for not taking it to heart themselves, and humbly recognizing their own real sins against God's revealed Word, and for not correctly understanding it in relation to Christ and His work of salvation. These Jewish Christians had the proverbial legalistic log in their own eye that blinded them to the darkness of their own sins. While trying to be guides to Gentile Christians who had already come out of this darkness, they instead were pushing them back in to the pit of fear and despair of God's judgment.

We Lutherans have much to thank God for in that we have received an amazingly clear understanding of just how free God's grace is. The Law is certainly preached from the pulpits of Lutheran congregations, not as the final goal of preaching, but as the preparation for the good news of Jesus' forgiveness. That forgiveness is the central reason for our weekly gatherings in the Divine Service. Luther's Catechisms keep us focused on the very heart of the Christian faith. And we blessedly receive the Sacraments as the personal and objective impartation of Christ's forgiveness, strengthening us against temptations and emboldening us to good works.

But lest we consider ourselves superior to other Christians and become haughty because of God's grace to us, let us heed the Holy Spirit lesson to the Jewish Christians in Rome: That we do not get conceited or puffed up in our knowledge to the dishonor of God's name. That we make daily and diligent use of God's Word, not as a course of study to learn the 'do's and 'do not's of Christianity, but so that we may imbibe the joy and peace of Christ and a clean conscience that it gives. In such studying, we will find many reasons for which to repent, not just of your sins of pride committed against your neighbor, but also the sins of pride committed against your God and Savior, like neglecting His Word, thinking that you have it well in hand, or using His Word as if it were a club with which to beat others into submission.

These sins are the result of our pride and lead us to hypocrisy, but St. Paul warns,

**no one is a [Christian] who is merely one outwardly,
nor is [baptism] outward and physical.**

**But a [Christian] is one inwardly, and [baptism] is a matter of the heart,
by the Spirit, not by the letter.**

So we find that our weekly gatherings are not pep-talks to greater sanctified living,
but spiritual refreshment in Christ's life and death and resurrection.

And as you gather as individuals to receive Christ and to be refreshed,
you gather with other individuals who also come to be refreshed,
who struggle with the same temptations, who fall into the same pit of fear and despair,
who desire that the logs of their eyes also be removed.

Our common need for Jesus' peace, our common joy in Christ's forgiveness,
our baptism into God's name makes us unified members of God's one family.

Our communion with the One true God through the body and blood of Christ
unites us into the one holy, Christian and apostolic Church.

So it is not the outward observances of behavioral rules that unites the Church & keeps it in peace,
but the Father's gracious will, the Son's life and death, and the Spirit's sanctifying our hearts.

From these come the fruit of good works and God-pleasing behavior,
for from His over-flowing love comes our love for Him and for our fellow sinners.

To focus on these fruits and to think that these make for Christian unity
instead brings distress and disunity, as we sinners judge and condemn one another
for not observing the behavioral rules to our standards and expectations.

And just as true, to neglect or ignore the natural fruits of our faith in love and good works
does not unite us and instead ignores Christ's example and exhortations.

The Lord grant us godly repentance of our pride and true humility as we study His Word
in order to find our peace and comfort in Christ alone
and grant that we live with each other in Christian unity
not through behavioral rules and expectations,
but through His forgiveness and love.

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forevermore. Amen.*

Soli Deo Gloria