

Remember not, O God, our transgressions against us, and record not our sins in Your book, but cast them into the depth of the sea, and remember them no more forever. Impute to us the obedience of Your Son, Jesus Christ, who fulfilled all righteousness for us and gave Himself a sacrifice for our sins. Let us live for His sake, and enable us to walk worthy of our calling *readily forgiving as forgiven*. Amen. (Reading the Psalms with Luther, CPH, p.203)

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

In Christ Jesus, who is the Son of the living God, never revealed to us through our sinful reason, but always and only through the miraculous working of God, dear fellow redeemed:

Jesus was a prophet and in truth, He was and is the Prophet of all prophets. But in that office of the Christ, Jesus is also the Priest of priests and King of kings. While the report given by the disciples that some considered Jesus to be the reappearance of one of the great preceding prophets, none were saying that He was more than a man. Peter, however, acknowledged that Jesus was much more than a human prophet, He was the very Son of the living God.

The work of a prophet of God was truly needed and significant, but Jesus spoke as One who came from the very bosom of the Father, revealing firsthand to us the love of God toward us all. Additionally, He came as the Priest who would make the supreme sacrifice for all of sinful mankind and interceding for us before the throne of heaven. Also, He came as the King who would rule all things for the benefit of His Church. Jesus' response to Peter's great confession provides the proper understanding of His work in our behalf. Let us consider what our Lord teaches here and be encouraged that you and I are - **Called to Follow to the Gates of Heaven: Forgiven and Forgiving.**

We might think that more of our neighbors today know who Jesus is, better than the neighbors of the disciples on the day of our text. But sadly, Christians are a small minority in our communities too and even many who call themselves Christians do not really understand who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

If Jesus were to ask us today "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?", we would respond with something like this: *Some say You are a great holy man who taught and showed how to live humbly with others in love; or You, Jesus, are considered to be a tragic figure in human history who was mistreated by hateful bigoted people who opposed Your philosophy of life; or You are a nonjudgmental and kind encourager, like a modern day coach encouraging others in their self-chosen lifestyles of happiness and peace; or You came to fix the social ills of the world and those who follow you rightly will eventually create a heaven here on earth.* The list could go on and on with many variations of false understanding.

The disciples' neighbors were not strictly speaking heathen. They had the Old Testament to set some boundaries on their misunderstandings of Jesus' identity. We live in a heathen society. So while most consider Jesus to be a real historical figure who was brutally crucified by the First Century Romans, He is seen as no more than a godly man albeit perhaps a naïve trouble-making social activist.

Since you join in Peter's confession and say of Jesus: *He is the Christ, the Son of the living God*, you can rejoice that God the Father has also revealed this to you for your own salvation. The confession Peter makes, is the confession of any and all Christians even to this day. It is the rock upon which Christ's Church is built. No other confession of Jesus, no matter how nice it may sound, is the rock of Christ's Church. All other confessions leave sinners teetering on the edge in this life, which only leads to the everlasting abyss of hell.

The gates of the kingdom of Satan cannot and will not prevail against Christ's Church built on that Gospel truth of who Jesus is and what He has done to save us. We are on solid ground all the way to the gates of heaven as we by God's gracious working trust in Jesus as our one and only Savior – the very Way to everlasting life itself.

## II

But this confession is more than just making a proper identification of the person of Jesus Christ, it is also confessing a faith in the meaning of Jesus' work in behalf of all sinners. Jesus' Church, His followers of all ages, is given the keys of heaven. The business of Jesus' Church is to open the gates of heaven by forgiving sinners. We are in the forgiving business.

The world also has a much different understanding of Jesus' Church and try to impose it upon the Church, making Her feel guilty if She does not do what it thinks She ought to do. Because in our call to follow Jesus, He commands us to love neighbor as self, helping neighbor in every need, the world thinks the Church is to focus primarily on social work. Because in our call to follow Jesus, He commands us to seek peace with our neighbors, the world demands the Church to focus on repairing the hostilities between nations, tribes, peoples, even neighborhoods. Because Jesus tells us to be good stewards of all of creation, the world insists that the Church should focus on environmental issues.

Woe to those Christians who pursue what the world demands of His Church. Since, if they do, they will fail doing the primary work Christ has called them to do; bringing the gift of forgiveness from God, which our Lord Jesus secured with His holy sacrifice upon the cross. We who follow Christ, the Son of the Living God live as those who have been forgiven fully and freely based on His work for all people. In turn, having been set free from the guilt, power and dominion of our sin, no longer threatened by death, we are called to bring the message of forgiveness to those our Lord places in our lives even our enemies.

In doing this however, there is the uncomfortable task at times of withholding forgiveness. When we engage those who meet God's Law with impenitence, that is, unwilling to confess sin and feel sorrow over those sins against God and neighbor, we are to warn that their sins condemn them. We mainly do this if a brother or sister in the faith fall from grace and become impenitent. But we are to be ready when asked by those outside the Church to speak to their spiritual condition. No, we are not to be out in the streets with signs calling sinners to repentance threatening eternal death if they do not; warning that judgment day is imminent. While always prepared to speak of the hope we have in Christ when asked, we are to speak the truth in love with those whom we may know do not confess their sins and Jesus to be their Savior.

Our calling to follow Jesus should be characterized by the joy of being forgiven completely of all our own sins, ready and willing to declare that same forgiveness to those convicted by their own sins even if they have sinned against us. Is not this the focus of our divine services as we gather together? Yes we will hear of our sins and we are called to repentance, but the predominate message we are to hear and receive in Word and Sacrament is that God loves us so much that He sent His Son, Christ Jesus, to sacrifice Himself for all sinners. We

should never leave these divine services laden with guilt, questioning forgiveness. We should hear and trust the message that in Christ God has forgiven us all our sins and that we can go about our daily vocations in the peace of being forgiven.

For all the times that the unbelieving world has heaped up its guilt upon you that you are not doing what it thinks you should be doing as a Christian, having been tempted to forsake the real calling of your Lord and having fallen for its lies, know that you are forgiven. Christ Jesus did not forsake the real purpose of His work serving you as Prophet, Priest and King, even though many in His day derided Him for not doing what they expected. He was even declared guilty, punished and executed because He would not alter the work He was sent to do. So His perfection in this regard is now yours through faith. You stand right now forgiven and declared absolutely righteous in Jesus' name. You are set free to forgive as you are forgiven. You have been entrusted with the keys of heaven. Fulfill your calling on your way to the gates of heaven to the glory of the God of love and salvation in Christ. Amen.