

A LONGER LOOK AT THE LESSONS

Study Guide and Leader Guide

for Pericopes as Listed in *Lutheran Service Book*

Series A

Propers 15–29

*Including additional lessons for Christian Education Sunday,
Reformation Day, and All Saints' Day*

By Ken Behnken



Copyright © 2009 Concordia Publishing House
3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63118-3968
1-800-325-3040 • www.cph.org

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Concordia Publishing House.

Written by Ken Behnken

Edited by Jonathan Schkade

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Quotations from the *Concordia Self-Study Bible* are copyright © 1986 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

The collects appearing in the Leader Guide are from *Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book*, copyright © 2006 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Small Catechism quotations are from *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, copyright © 1986, 1991 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Quotation from *The Word Becoming Flesh* are copyright © 1979 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Quotations from *The Word of the Lord Grows* are copyright © 1961 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Quotations from *Follow Me: Discipleship According to Saint Matthew* are copyright © 1961 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

This publication may be available in braille, in large print, or on cassette tape for the visually impaired. Please allow 8 to 12 weeks for delivery. Write to the Lutheran Blind Mission, 7550 Watson Rd., St. Louis, MO 63119-4409; call toll-free 1-888-215-2455; or visit the Web site: www.blindmission.org.

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09

Contents

Introduction	5
Study Guide	6
Lesson 1 —Proper 15	7
Lesson 2 —Christian Education Sunday.....	11
Lesson 3 —Proper 16	14
Lesson 4 —Proper 17	18
Lesson 5 —Proper 18	22
Lesson 6 —Proper 19	26
Lesson 7 —Proper 20	30
Lesson 8 —Proper 21	34
Lesson 9 —Proper 22	38
Lesson 10 —Proper 23	42
Lesson 11 —Proper 24	46
Lesson 12 —Reformation Day	50
Lesson 13 —All Saints’ Day.....	53
Lesson 14 —Proper 25	57
Lesson 15 —Proper 26	62
Lesson 16 —Proper 27	65
Lesson 17 —Proper 28	69
Lesson 18 —Proper 29	72
Leader Guide	76
Lesson 1	77
Lesson 2	80

Lesson 3	83
Lesson 4	86
Lesson 5	89
Lesson 6	92
Lesson 7	95
Lesson 8	98
Lesson 9	101
Lesson 10	104
Lesson 11	107
Lesson 12	110
Lesson 13	113
Lesson 14	116
Lesson 15	119
Lesson 16	122
Lesson 17	125
Lesson 18	127

Introduction

The Three-Year Series of Scripture readings appointed for use in public worship first appeared in 1969 in the *Ordo lectionum Missae*, developed by the Roman Catholic Church. Shortly thereafter, the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (ILCW) prepared a Lutheran version of this series, which was eventually included in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and, with some slight modifications, in *Lutheran Worship* (1982). *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (1993), the hymnal of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, also included a version of the ILCW lectionary.

In 1983, the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT), an ecumenical study group, published the *Common Lectionary* based on the *Ordo lectionum Missae* as well as the Lutheran and various Protestant three-year cycles in use at the time. After significant field-testing, the CCT then published the *Revised Common Lectionary* in 1992, which was adopted for use in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1998 and adapted for use in *Lutheran Service Book*, the new hymnal of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

This revised edition of *A Longer Look at the Lessons* takes into account the differences between various versions of the Three-Year Series in use among Lutherans today and provides studies for the system you have designated. The studies offer guidance for personal study and prompt discussion and application of the pericopes by adult Bible study groups.

Two basic principles were followed in structuring the various versions of Three-Year Lectionary: a *thematic principle* and a *principle of semicontinuous reading*. The *thematic principle* is generally employed during the festival half-year. Readings are selected to emphasize the themes of the festivals and the seasons that surround them. The primary reading is always the Holy Gospel, and that is why it is studied first in these materials. The Old Testament Reading (or First Reading) and the Epistle are then selected to support and enhance the theme set forth by the Holy Gospel.

The *principle of semicontinuous reading* is applied especially during the nonfestival half of the Church Year (the Sundays after Pentecost). The Holy Gospels of Series A are largely from Matthew, Series B from Mark, and Series C from Luke. Readings from John are inserted in all the series, especially during the festival half-year. The Epistles also represent semicontinuous readings through particular letters. The Old Testament Readings, however, are selected thematically in relation to the Holy Gospel throughout both halves of the Church Year.

The overall purpose of assigning Scripture readings in this way is to provide an annual review of salvation history and of major Christian doctrines, as well as to read significant sections of Holy Scripture during certain times of the Church Year. Pastors have found these pericopal studies helpful as they prepare their sermons and services from week to week.

Study Guide

How to Use the Study Guide

The Study Guide has been prepared with three goals in mind. First, it provides information about the lessons and their contexts. A look at the Greek or Hebrew is sometimes included. Doctrinal emphases are pointed out, and the text is often related to other statements of Scripture. Second, it asks questions that help the group explore the texts and provoke analytical thought. Answers are to be sought first in the pericopes themselves, with other references cited for backup or expansion of the thought. Questions that explore the text are just asking “What does it say?” to focus attention. They are easy to answer—so easy that people sometimes feel uneasy about stating the obvious. Help your group understand this. Don’t spend time on these; just get a focus on what the text says and how it says it, and move on to questions that ask “What does it mean?” These require more time and thought. Let your group struggle a little if necessary; don’t be in a hurry to provide answers yourself. Sometimes, restating the question will help them move to the point. Third, the Study Guide encourages discussion and application to Christian life today by asking “What does it mean for us?” This is the essential goal of every Bible study. Give your group members time to express themselves. Encourage and accept their applications and testimonies. Don’t hesitate to share your own views and experiences, but *don’t take over*, or group members will back off and wait for you to do this every time. Fill-in-the-blank exercises focus the attention of the group on key words of the text; and these are intended to provide emphasis of their significance in a simple way.

Make use of added Scripture references—but save time by using slips of paper to assign them ahead of time to individuals who don’t mind reading aloud in your group.

Lesson 1

Proper 15

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 15:21–28

Jesus had been ministering in and around Capernaum and had conflicted openly with the Pharisees over “the tradition of the elders” (v. 1). He had indicted them for using such traditions to excuse failure to obey God’s command to honor their elderly parents by saying the money for their care had been given as an offering to God instead. He judged them guilty of honoring God with their lips while their hearts were far from Him. He said their teachings were but rules taught by men.

The Pharisees had criticized Jesus’ disciples for eating without ceremonially washing their hands first. Jesus explained to the crowd that it is not what goes into a person’s mouth but what comes out of it that “defiles” a person. He told them to leave the Pharisees and their legalisms alone, calling the Pharisees “blind guides” (v. 14). Jesus then connected the mouth with the heart, and the heart with the evil that is part of human life.

Jesus’ ministry was undergoing a change in direction, precipitated by the death of John the Baptist and the growing animosity of the Jews’ religious leaders. He no longer sought out the people by traveling from village to village in Galilee to teach in the synagogues and in the open countryside. Instead, He began to withdraw with His disciples to focus on their training as His apostles. He was looking toward the fulfillment of His mission in His suffering and death. That was the reason for this withdrawal to the region of Tyre and Sidon. These Syrophenician cities were to the north and west of Galilee on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. They were the seaport terminals of the Way of the Sea, the trade route that connected Damascus and regions beyond with the Greek world—a route that swung down to pass the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum. This was an easy, natural road for Jesus to take in His desire to get away from the crowds for a time of interaction with His disciples.

Jesus’ reputation as a healer had preceded Him. No large-scale interaction with the Canaanites of the region is indicated, but Jesus was always ready to minister in mercy to those who came to Him in faith. Matthew included this incident as a forecast of active outreach to “the nations,” the mission of the Church for whom he wrote his Gospel.

1. What does it say about this Gentile woman that she called Jesus “Son of David”? Why did Jesus not respond immediately to her call? Why were the disciples eager to have Jesus send her away?

2. Why did Jesus, who came to be the Savior of all, say to His disciples, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”? (Compare Matthew 10:5–6.)

The woman persisted, only to face another test. The Greek language, which was probably spoken in this exchange, softens Jesus' words to her a little. The word used here for "dogs" does not speak of the stray, scavenging dogs so common in the marketplaces, but of family pets, kept in the house and allowed even in the dining area.

3. In what sense, however, did this choice of metaphor hit this Gentile woman hard as a test of her faith? What is so striking about the woman's response to Jesus?

We're not told how her daughter's affliction had manifested itself, only that she was "severely oppressed by a demon."

4. Why did Jesus help this woman and heal her daughter even though she was not one of the "lost sheep of the house of Israel"? (Compare Matthew 13:53–58.)

5. What does this incident encourage in us in our own life in the Kingdom?

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 56:1, 6–8

Following the chapter that pictured the Kingdom as a messianic banquet, offered free of cost to the faithful, comes this chapter that extended the covenant to foreigners.

From the beginning, Israel included foreigners, many of them women. Joseph married an Egyptian, so his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh, who became the patriarchs of two of Israel's tribes, brought that bloodline into Israel. Moses married a Midianite woman. Rahab of Jericho and Ruth the Moabitess became part of Israel and are listed in the genealogical ancestry of Jesus. Sometimes whole families and tribes became *gerim*, or "strangers," in Israel, placing themselves under Israel's protection. Such newcomers were required to share in all the religious obligations and prerogatives, including becoming fully Judaized through circumcision.

Later, the rabbinical schools practiced active proselytizing. Gentiles who entered Judaism fully by accepting circumcision were called "proselytes of righteousness" or "proselytes of the altar." Those who were attracted to Judaism, attended the synagogue services, assumed the moral and some of the legal obligations, but declined to be circumcised, were known as "proselytes of the gate" or "God-fearers."

In this pericope, Isaiah did not proclaim an indiscriminate acceptance of foreigners by the Lord, but specified foreigners who would ____.

6. What assurance was given to each foreigner who "holds fast [to] My covenant"? How would the temple itself reflect this international thrust of God's grace?

7. When would this prophecy find its fulfillment? (See 1 Peter 2:4–10.)
8. What does the sovereign Lord’s declaration that closes this lesson say to you?
9. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 11:1–2a, 13–15, 28–32

Paul was writing to a congregation that was strongly Jewish in character and background. They may have questioned his free approach to including Gentiles in the Church. He had not been to Rome in person, so he stated his case by including in his letter a middle section devoted to the subject of Jew and Gentile in God’s saving purpose. In the first part of chapter 11, he called Jews who believe in Jesus “a remnant, chosen by grace” (v. 5). In this pericope, he then spoke to Gentile Christians about their attitude toward their Jewish brothers and sisters. He brought assurance that “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26)—comprising the spiritual Israel of believing Gentiles and the believing Jewish remnant.

Paul’s outreach to Gentiles with the Gospel was wholeheartedly for their sake. He wanted by all possible means to save some. (See 1 Corinthians 9:19–23.)

10. What added motive did Paul reveal as to why he made so much of his ministry as apostle to the Gentiles?

11. How did the rejection of Christ by the Jews become “the reconciliation of the world”? (See Acts 13:42–52.) In what sense is acceptance of Christ by Jews “life from the dead”?

Paul was concerned about the attitude of Jewish Christians toward Gentile Christians—but he was equally concerned about the attitude of Gentile Christians toward Jews. He did not want them foolishly to boast or be conceited and arrogant about their now having by faith what God’s original chosen people had lost through unbelief. Verses 17–27 deal with this under a metaphor of Gentile Christians being wild olive branches that have been grafted into the original Jewish cultivated olive tree’s rootstock.

Paul called God’s gifts and call “irrevocable.” The *Concordia Self-Study Bible* explains: “God does not change his mind with reference to his call. Even though Israel is presently in a state of unbelief, God’s purpose will be fulfilled in all who believe” (p. 1735). The closing words of this

pericope set forth two cause-and-effect equations that summarize Paul's analysis of God's desire and purpose:

___ disobedience (rejection of Christ) = God's merciful outreach to ___. God's mercy to ___ = disobedient ___ turning again to God for mercy.

12. What is meant by "God has consigned all to disobedience, that He may have mercy on all"?

13. How has God consigned you to disobedience so you appreciate His mercy more?

Lesson 2

Christian Education Sunday

The Holy Gospel: Luke 18:15–17

It was customary among the Jews that when an important rabbi was in their town, the mothers brought their children to him for a blessing. Luke recorded one such occasion. The disciples rebuked the mothers, no doubt, because they thought Jesus was too busy to be bothered with such trivialities—for Jewish men did not have much to do with children in public. Jesus told them—and He tells us—“Let the children come to Me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.”

14. How may we bring our children and grandchildren to Jesus?

15. How might we hinder our children’s and grandchildren’s coming to Jesus?

16. Why did Luke record this incident right after Jesus’ telling and applying His parable of the Pharisee and the publican in the temple? What does it mean to receive the kingdom of God like a child?

The Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 6:4–15

Deuteronomy means “second law.” It records Moses’ farewell encouragement to his generation and to succeeding generations to revere and serve and obey Yahweh. It repeats the Law that he had received and handed down and applies it theologically to the relationship the Israelites were to enjoy with Yahweh as their covenant God. This pericope includes the *Shema*, the creed of the Old Testament faithful that Jesus quoted in today’s Holy Gospel. It stresses, in contrast with the prevailing polytheism of other nations, that Yahweh is the one and only God. He is not one among many but the one and only. The word *Shema* means “hear”—it’s the first Hebrew word of this creed.

17. Why is “Hear!” a good way to begin such a statement of the faith?

These words follow Moses' repetition of the Ten Commandments. His concern for the continued faithfulness of his people is evident. He had seen the faithlessness of those who had left Egypt and had led them in the desert wanderings imposed by Yahweh until a new generation would arise to enter the Promised Land. His encouragement to fear the Lord may best be understood as "hold the Lord in awe and reverence."

18. What did Moses assure them would be the result of revering and obeying the Lord? (See v. 3.)

19. What summary commandment did Moses state here as the basis for all the others? (See v. 5.) What would enable the Israelites to love the Lord and thus want to obey Him?

20. What did Moses stress with "on your heart," "teach them diligently," "talk of them," "bind them," and "write them"?

The use of phylacteries and mezuzahs grew out of a literal application of these words. Phylacteries were leather prayer bands that held small boxes in place on the forehead and the arm during morning prayer. The box for the forehead had four compartments for parchments on which Exodus 13:1–10, 11–16; Deuteronomy 6:5–9; and 11:13–21 were written. The box for the arm had one compartment for a single parchment on which all of these were written. These were aids for Jewish men in their prayers. Their use meant daily recommitment to love Yahweh with all their mind and all their strength. Mezuzahs were small wooden boxes containing a parchment on which Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and 11:13–21 were formally written in twenty-two lines. Mezuzahs were attached to door frames of the main entrances to houses and were touched by family members as they left the house and as they returned as a reminder of the covenant.

21. What religious artifacts serve a similar purpose in our homes and in our devotions?

22. What were the great spiritual dangers that concerned Moses and about which he warned the people of Israel? How do we face the same kind of dangers in our lives as American Christians?

23. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Second Lesson: Acts 2:37–41

24. Peter ended his Pentecost sermon with “God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (v. 36). What did Peter tell the people when they then asked, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Peter’s answer exemplifies Spirit-powered preaching that calls on people to do what they of themselves are unable to do. (See 1 Corinthians 2:14; 12:3.) But when the Good News of Jesus is proclaimed as Peter did, the call to repent and be baptized becomes part of the dynamic by which the Spirit works His miracle of faith and regeneration.

25. God’s Word is power to make things happen. What is our responsibility in this process?

26. What would those who accepted Peter’s call to repentance and faith be acknowledging about Jesus in being baptized in His name? Here the Greek word for “sin” is *hamartia*, which means “missing the mark.” What basic sin, what “missing the mark,” would these Jews be confessing in repenting and being baptized? (See John 3:16–18; 8:24.)

27. Three thousand believed and were immediately baptized. Why were they not given more instruction in the Gospel before being baptized?

28. For what did Peter’s inspired words “The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself” prepare the way? What assurance comes to us today through these words of Peter? What guidance?

29. That day of Pentecost was the birthday of the Christian Church. What was immediately at the center of the life of this congregation? What does that say to us on Christian Education Sunday?

Lesson 3

Proper 16

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 16:13–20

Caesarea Philippi, twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee at the foot of Mount Hermon, was a resort city. It had been enlarged and beautified by Philip, a son of Herod the Great, who ruled the area by Rome's permission. He renamed the city "Caesarea of Philip" in honor of Tiberias Caesar. Jesus took His disciples there to get away, to focus on what lay ahead and prepare them for their calling as His apostles.

Jesus asked about the opinion of others as a way of focusing the disciples' minds on their own convictions. They said some thought of Him as John the Baptist. John was dead, beheaded by Herod Antipas. But because of Jesus' miracles, a superstitious notion held that John had returned from the dead and was working through Jesus. (See Mark 6:14–16.) Elijah—Malachi's prophecy about the Way-Preparer ends our Old Testament Scriptures and was well known. (See Malachi 4:5–6.) In the New Testament, John is identified as that Elijah, first by the angel announcing his coming and then by Jesus Himself. (See Luke 1:17; Matthew 11:11–14.) Jeremiah or one of the prophets—Jeremiah was considered one of the greatest prophets. Moses' words about God raising up a prophet like him may also have been behind this idea. (See Deuteronomy 18:15.)

In the Greek, *humeis*, "you," is the first word and makes Jesus' question very pointed: "You, what about you?" Peter spoke for the group, expressing the faith given to them by the Holy Spirit, and this truth which was revealed "by My Father in heaven" (v. 17). The Greek *Christ* and the Hebrew *Messiah* both mean "the anointed one." Anointing with perfumed olive oil set a person apart for a special task, like the anointing of young David, who later became king of Israel.

30. When did Jesus receive His anointing? (See Acts 10:37–38; Matthew 3:16.)

Jesus generally referred to Himself as "the Son of Man," a less commonly used messianic title. Peter went beyond titles to confess Jesus to be "the Son of the living God." He and the others evidently had absorbed Jesus' teaching about Himself and had accepted the testimony of His miracles. (See John 5:16–27; 14:11.)

In response, Jesus used the formal "Simon Bar-Jonah" ("son of Jonah"), marking the deep importance of the occasion.

31. Why did Jesus say that Peter was blessed to be able to answer as he had?

Jesus then used the nickname He had given Simon in a play on words by which the importance of Peter and his confession of Jesus would be seen in the scheme of things in the Lord's kingdom (and that of his fellow disciples). *Petros* means "rock." Roman Catholics cite this verse to contend

that the pope (“the successor of Peter”) is the vicar of Christ and the foundational authority of the Church. In the Greek text, however, *petra*, in the phrase “on this rock,” is feminine and cannot refer directly back to the masculine *Petros*.

32. On what was Jesus saying He would build His Church, if not the person of Peter?

33. Why will all the forces of hell never be able to overcome Christ’s Church?

Jesus then gave to Peter the Keys of the kingdom of heaven. This was a bestowal of formal authority to represent Jesus in pointed expressions of the Gospel. The same authority was later given to the Twelve and, on Easter Sunday, to all to whom Jesus appeared in the Upper Room. (See Matthew 18:18; John 20:22–23.)

34. What is suggested by Jesus speaking of Keys of the kingdom of heaven?

Freeing the repentant from their sins—“loosing,” “forgiving”—is the happy, primary function of the Church. “Binding” sins to the unrepentant is a necessary counterpart. This unhappy function underscores accountability to Christ, whose way is being rejected, and pointedly calls the unrepentant to repentance. It is not to be used arbitrarily but only as a needed judgment of evident sins of commission or omission on the part of church members—never in judgment of motives or attitudes.

35. How are the Keys of the Kingdom formally used in the life of the Church? How may they be used in private, personal interaction with those around us?

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 51:1–6

Four “songs” in Isaiah are identified as Servant Songs since they point to the messianic Servant who will fulfill God’s plan of salvation for His people: 42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–11; and 52:13–53:12. The first two describe the Lord’s equipping of the Servant for His task; the third and fourth point to the Messiah as the Suffering Servant who gives Himself for the people. This lesson follows the third Servant Song.

36. History. Who is the “rock” from whom those who “pursue righteousness” and “seek the LORD” were cut and hewn? What did the prophet’s pointing to the fact that Abraham was only one when the Lord called him, but was made many, say to the exiles in Babylon and the remnant who returned to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple?

37. Creation. What did the prophet's picturing the desert becoming like the Garden of Eden say to the exiles and the remnant when Jerusalem was lying in ruins? What would be the result in the lives of God's people?

38. Eschatology. What was the prophet foretelling with "I will set My justice for a light to the peoples" and "the coastlands hope for Me, and for My arm they wait"? To what do "the heavens vanish like smoke," "the earth will wear out like a garment," and "they who dwell in it will die in like manner" point? What assurance is given in the face of these descriptions of the temporary nature of this world?

39. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 11:33–12:8

Paul had written in chapters 9–11 about the Church's inclusion of Jews and Gentiles. He had set forth God's choice of Israel as His chosen nation; Israel's unbelief regarding Jesus as the Christ; the believing Jews as the promised remnant; the Gentiles as engrafted branches on Israel's rootstock; and the salvation of all of Israel (believing Jews and believing Gentiles). This led Paul to swing into an exultant expression of praise to God for the mystery of His grace.

Paul exclaimed over "the depth of the ____ and ____ and ____ of God!"

40. How are "wisdom" and "knowledge" distinct from each other, and yet related?

41. Give examples of God's judgments (decisions) and paths that are beyond our searching and tracing out.

42. What progression may be seen in Paul's three Scripture-based questions? How do you answer these questions for yourself?

“From Him and through Him and to Him are all things.”

43. God will have that glory forever. How can you express it also here and now?

In the remaining chapters, Paul provided guidance in the ethics of Christian living and service. His “therefore” attached what was to follow to what he had already written.

44. Why did Paul urge the offering of our bodies and not just our hearts or spirits?

Paul called this *latreia*, the word used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament for the sacrifices brought under the ceremonial law. The ceremonial law involved offering ____; in the New Testament, Paul called on Christians to offer ____.

45. “Conformed” deals with outward, evident involvement in a way of life; “transformed” calls for a change from inside out. What did Paul say will produce this transformation in us?

46. *Dokimazein*, “testing” and “discern,” refers to testing coins or metals to prove their genuineness. What does the apostle’s “by testing you may discern what is the will of God” tell us about the Christian’s ongoing transformation process?

47. Why is it important for Christians to have realistic and not exaggerated views of their importance as individuals in the life of the Church? What blessings and responsibilities are ours because we are intimately attached as members of Christ’s Body to other Christians? Why does the Lord bless different Christians with different gifts?

Lesson 4

Proper 17

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 16:21–28

Have you ever been really sure of something and felt really good about it, only to come up with new information that turned things around and left you puzzled? That must be how Peter felt. He had confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, and had been affirmed in this by Jesus, who pronounced him “blessed” and gave him the Keys of the Kingdom. But then Jesus began to tell the disciples about things that were going to happen that just didn’t fit the picture of what they expected of the Christ. Suddenly, when he expressed strong reaction to Jesus’ words, good old Peter, the enthusiastic confessor, became “Satan,” a stumbling block to Jesus.

We who live on this side of the cross and have the New Testament and centuries of theological explanation easily say, “Jesus suffered on the cross for our sins.” For the disciples, as they followed Jesus into circumstances that led to His being God’s atoning sacrifice for sin, it was not so simple. This contradicted what they and all the Jewish people hoped for in the promised Messiah. They just could not understand. (See Luke 18:34.) They would understand only when Jesus’ mission was completed. (See Luke 24:44–49; Acts 2:22–24.)

48. How did Peter’s objections make him “Satan,” a stumbling block, to Jesus?

49. At what other times did Jesus have to deal with that kind of temptation to reach His goals in ways other than the cross? (See Matthew 4:8–10; 26:38–39, 42; John 6:10–15; 12:20–28.) How were these times of testing resolved?

For men who didn’t want to hear about His suffering and death, men who had the popular view of the Promised One as a kingly Messiah who would rule in glory and bring prosperity to Israel, Jesus had more surprising words. He said that His experience would also be their experience as His followers. They would not enjoy the easy path of glory they anticipated. His “If anyone would come [literally, ‘wills to come’] after Me” stresses the vital importance of our making up our minds, in the power of the Spirit, about discipleship—not being content with sentimental “believing.”

50. Why must we deny ourselves if we want to follow Jesus? What is meant by taking up our own crosses?

Jesus' words about saving or losing life and His searching questions force all of us to ask ourselves, "Am I making things, people, or my own will and its desires more important than the health, welfare, and security of my soul in relation to Jesus?"

There is always a temptation to stress a theology of glory instead of a theology of the cross. A theology of glory keys in on the victory won by Jesus, not only in terms of rebirth to a new relationship with God and assurance of eternal life, but also in terms of a Christian's present experience in the world. It suggests that "it is God's will that Christians enjoy prosperous and healthy lives as we serve Him." God, of course, can and does bless His people with prosperity and health, according to His will, but God's blessing is not to be equated with earthly prosperity and health, as if anything less would not be in accord with His will for His people. Jesus pointed to the cross, His own and ours, as the way to ultimate glory—a way that involves self-denial, service, and even suffering. The true blessing is that Jesus' cross proves that God is for us and with us in everything, and it may be that we appreciate this most fully as we carry our own crosses in Christ-related self-denial, service, and suffering. (See 2 Corinthians 12:7–10; Romans 8:17, 28, 31–39.)

51. What dangers to the Church are inherent in adopting a theology of glory?

52. What assurances are ours as we hold to a theology of the cross? What challenges are presented to us?

53. How do Jesus' closing words in this Holy Gospel underscore the vital importance of denying ourselves, taking up our crosses, and following Jesus? What was Jesus referring to with "there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom"?

The Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 15:15–21

Jeremiah, a priest, was called at a young age to be God's prophet. His name means "Yahweh throws," and he was thrown into a prophetic mission he did not choose or relish. He had to bring a message of unavoidable judgment and doom to Judah. He is sometimes called "the weeping prophet" because his rejection by the leaders and the people, who did not want to hear a doom-and-gloom message, often led him to call out to the Lord for redress against his opponents. In this pericope, Jeremiah expressed his fear that the Lord, because He is long-suffering, might even negate his prophecy and end up sparing those who had so strongly opposed Jeremiah.

54. In calling Jeremiah, the Lord had touched his mouth and said, "Behold, I have put My words in your mouth" (1:9). How do Jeremiah's words here show his initial eagerness and excitement about God's inspiring him to bring His message?

55. Why did Jeremiah say to God, “I am called by Your name”?

56. What was behind Jeremiah’s intense feelings of loneliness?

57. What led Jeremiah to think of his pain as unceasing and his wounds as incurable, refusing to be healed? What questions began to creep into his mind and heart?

58. What instructions did the Lord give His complaining, questioning prophet? What did the Lord mean by telling Jeremiah, “They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them”?

There is an interesting literary quality in this section, a play on words, in the fact that “return,” “restore,” and “turn” are all from the same Hebrew root word.

59. What assurances was the Lord giving Jeremiah in all of this?

60. In what ways do we, as Jesus’ spokesmen to our world, relate to Jeremiah and his mission, his feelings about it, and his instructions and assurances?

61. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 12:9–21

In a series of rapid-fire exhortations in verses 9–16, Paul applied what it means to be living sacrifices in the practical setting of daily life. They encourage us to practice a sincere love that reflects sensitivity to our Lord’s presence with us in our own situations and sensitivity to the situations of those around us. Read Paul’s apostolic encouragements aloud together to get a sense of their impact.

Paul then moved to a practical reality: there are going to be times in our life experience when other people’s words or actions do hurt us. Paul’s words were especially pointed for the Roman

Christians, who were beginning to feel the pressures of official persecution. Through Paul's instruction, God wants also us to know that it is important that we neither initiate conflict nor respond in kind. We are to keep before us and imitate the example of our Lord Jesus Himself. (See 1 Peter 2:21–23.)

62. How will giving thought to doing what is honorable in the sight of all help us avert situations that produce conflict?

63. What happens to us and to our antagonists when we try to get even with those who have hurt us?

64. What dynamic is brought into play for us and for our antagonists when we refuse to repay evil for evil and instead turn matters over to God?

65. What will motivate us to work at overcoming evil with good? (See Matthew 5:43–48; 2 Corinthians 5:14–15.)

Lesson 5

Proper 18

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 18:1–20

When Cain killed his brother Abel and was confronted by God, he tried to excuse himself from responsibility by asking, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” However, God’s second basic command is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In the family of man, we are responsible for one another just because we are God’s creatures together. In the Christian family, the Body of Christ, we have even greater reason for responsible, caring love for one another: we together have been redeemed by Christ, and His Spirit lives in us. (See 1 John 4:19–21.)

66. “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” What does asking the question reveal about the questioners? How did Jesus deflate any such indications of self-importance in the Kingdom?

67. How did Jesus emphasize the importance of responsibility for the spiritual welfare of our fellow Christians? How did He show that Christians should go to any length to avoid willful sinning ourselves?

Jesus repeated His gift of the Keys of the Kingdom, bestowing the authority to represent Him in human interaction on all of His disciples. He shows us that sometimes, love for a brother or sister in Christ has to be “tough love”—love that admonishes and corrects and, we hope, restores the erring. This is why our Lord “places the solitary into a family,” also in the context of the Church. We are not alone as Christians; we have brothers and sisters with whom we are one Body in Christ.

In that Body, we love to use the “right-hand key” to assure one another that we are forgiven. But sometimes also the “left-hand key,” which binds the sins of the unrepentant to them, must be used. The practice of church discipline and its goals are clearly spelled out here. It is always to be person oriented, more concerned about restoring erring people than about issues. But it is indispensable to the Christian community. *Disciple* and *discipline* are basically the same word and cannot be separated as we follow Jesus.

68. “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault.” What kind of sins are included in this, and what kind of sins are excluded in applying Jesus’ instruction?

69. The sin may be public, an offense to the whole Body of the Church, and not just a sin against an individual. Give an example of an obvious sin of commission and of an obvious sin of omission that would require bold, personal, loving admonition.

70. Why is the first step always to be “between you and him alone”? What happens if this first private step is bypassed and others are involved immediately? What does “If he listens to you” imply? To what have you “gained your brother”?

If he will not listen, taking one or two with you adds weight.

71. Who would these “one or two others” probably be in the life of a congregation? Who are “the church” to whom a refusal to repent is to be reported?

72. What does it mean for the Church to treat the stubbornly unrepentant “as a Gentile and a tax collector”?

Excommunication, after persistent, loving admonition, simply recognizes and makes clear to the sinner that unrepentant sin is a sinner choosing to be lost and rebuffing the Seeker. It is the most powerful application of the either/or demands of the Gospel.

“If two of you agree . . . , it will be done for them.” *Symphonein* means agreeing after having rehearsed and discussed a matter sufficiently.

73. Is this an open-ended promise that God will do whatever two Christians might agree on?

74. What is the source of power behind this agreement of the Church in prayer?

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 33:7–9

The Old Testament prophets generally were called by the Lord to address the people of Israel during ebb times in their religious and moral life. The prophets brought a message of judgment against perfunctory religious practice and against social injustice and, at times, had to speak out boldly against outright idolatry and the immorality that idolatry encourages. They called God’s chosen people to repentance and to living, personal faith. Their message always included assurance

of the Lord's faithfulness to His covenant promise that would be shown in His acceptance and blessing of a repentant people.

Ezekiel was God's prophet to the people of Judah during the Babylonian exile. He had been part of the first deportation, and during the seven-year period that followed, while Jerusalem still stood, he continually warned that its doom and destruction would come. When the city was destroyed and more exiles joined them in Babylon, Ezekiel's message became one of encouragement. The danger for the exiles was that they might lose hope of restoration, settle into life in Babylon, and forsake their national and covenantal identity—and many did. In this pericope, Ezekiel is designated a watchman and is warned to live up to the resultant responsibilities. The preceding verses give a general picture of a watchman and his responsibilities. (See 33:1–6.)

Ezekiel is called "son of man" by the Lord. This is not the usage of the title that Jesus drew from as He referred to Himself as "the Son of Man." That was drawn from the messianic thrust of Daniel 7:13–14.

75. What did "son of man" emphasize about Ezekiel?

76. What principle is established by the Lord's words to Ezekiel about his calling as a prophet and a watchman? Is it a fair and true principle?

77. What does this principle say to us regarding the Christian witness we are to bring and the brotherly concern we are to have for one another?

78. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 13:1–10

The remarkable thing about Paul's words is that they were written at a time when Christians were beginning to experience persecution by Roman authorities, who eventually declared Christianity to be an illegal religion. Their doing "what is good" was not always bringing them commendation. Sometimes they lived in fear and terror of the authorities. Paul himself would suffer martyrdom under Emperor Nero. Here Paul did not write just a sociopolitical critique of the Roman government of his day. He gives inspired instruction regarding Christian attitudes toward governing authorities of all times.

79. How are Christians to look at the role of government?

Martin Luther spoke of God's two hands. His right hand is the Church, through which He reaches out in mercy to humanity through the Gospel. His left hand is governmental authority, through which He uses power to ensure the stability of society. Both are God's hands at work, and it is important that their functions not to be confused or mixed. Governing authorities are not intended to dispense mercy and forgiveness, but to maintain order. The Church is not to use power to force people to become "Christians" or their societies to impose Christian morality, but is to preach the Good News of Jesus. Paul's calling the one in governmental authority "God's servant for your good" is made even more striking by his calling public servants "ministers of God," *leitouroi*, a word usually reserved for those who are giving service and offering sacrifices as priests.

80. Is it generally true that one who does what is good as a law-abiding citizen does not need to fear those in authority? What do you do when governing authority becomes oppressive and exploitive of those it is supposed to serve?

81. What is "the sword" that is borne by governing authorities? What effect does it have on society when authorities use the sword as "the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer"? What happens when this is neglected or misused?

82. What higher motivation do Christians have to obey laws and support government? (See 1 Peter 2:13–17.)

83. When is it necessary for Christians to disobey authorities? (See Acts 5:29.)

84. How is agape love "the fulfilling of the law"?

Lesson 6

Proper 19

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 18:21–35

Jesus gave the Keys of the Kingdom to Peter, then extended this authority to speak for Him to all His disciples. He focused on the loving concern that reaches out also with admonition in Jesus' name to a brother or sister who is deadening his or her relationship with Jesus through evident willful sin or persistent neglect of Word and Sacrament. Peter then came to Jesus with a question that revealed that he had understood that the point of the power of the Keys is to give forgiveness in Jesus' name to those who repent. The purpose is to include, not to exclude; to reconcile, not to reject.

85. What does Peter's "How often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" say about this matter of forgiving those who have offended or hurt us?

86. What was Jesus suggesting with His "seventy times seven"?

87. Is it realistic to think of continuing to forgive someone whose "repentances" are short-lived and who just continues to offend and hurt you?

88. Why is it important to you that you learn to forgive those who offend and hurt you? (See Matthew 6:12, 14–15.)

Franzmann says in *Follow Me*: "There is a Must of forgiveness in the disciple's life. . . . Forgiveness is the ground the disciple walks on, and the air he breathes. . . . The disciple who will not live toward his fellow disciple by the forgiving word which he has heard from his God has forfeited the forgiving word of God. If he violates the fellowship with the brother whom God has placed beside him, he forfeits his fellowship with God" (p. 154).

89. What does your forgiveness do to and for the one you forgive?

Only Matthew provides us with this powerful parable of the unmerciful servant. We readily understand its point. Also there is an extreme contrast between the two amounts owed. The hundred denarii owed by the fellow servant was not an insignificant sum. It represented a hundred days' wages. But it becomes insignificant when compared with ten thousand talents.

90. Why did the king's gracious forgiveness of the unmerciful servant's debt not have the desired effect on the servant?

91. How necessary is it for us to learn the lesson of forgiveness taught by Jesus' parable? (See Mark 11:25.)

92. How can we get power to grow in our readiness to "forgive your brother from your heart"?

The Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 50:15–21

As a young boy, the favorite of his father, Jacob, Joseph told his family some dreams he had, dreams that obviously pointed to a time when his brothers and even his parents would bow down before him. In their jealousy and anger, his brothers sold him into slavery and told their father a wild animal had killed him. Joseph trusted the Lord, and the Lord's blessing followed him to Egypt. In whatever circumstance he found himself, Joseph put forth his best effort, and under God's guidance and blessing, he continually rose to the top. As a slave he was placed in charge of all of Potiphar's household. When falsely accused by his master's wife and imprisoned, he became the chief trustee in the management of the prison. When God enabled him to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, he was made Pharaoh's right-hand man and administered the storage of grain during the predicted years of abundance and its distribution during the predicted years of famine. In time, Joseph brought his family to Egypt, and they were settled on choice delta land in Goshen.

When their father died, the brothers feared that Joseph would take his revenge on them. Joseph had become the second in authority in all of Egypt, and the brothers knew he could do to them as he pleased, so they approached him carefully.

93. How did the brothers add psychological and spiritual force to their plea for forgiveness? Why did Joseph weep when he received their message? What may be seen in Joseph's "am I in the place of God?" (See Romans 12:17–21.)

94. How did Joseph look at everything he had experienced in life? What encourages us to look at life in the same way? (See Romans 8:28–39.)

95. How has God directed the course of your life so that you were ready at the opportune time to provide some significant service to the people around you?

96. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 14:1–12

The Early Church, also in Rome, was a blend of Jew and Gentile. The Jewish Christians carried with them the traditions of Judaism and its ceremonial laws. Because these laws prescribing dietary restrictions and the careful observance of the Sabbath had been so important in the practice of their faith—setting them apart as the people of the covenant—they understandably continued to have conscience scruples about such matters as Christians. And they sometimes felt that Gentile Christians should also be expected to follow their rules.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and through the strong testimony of Peter, the question had been formally resolved at the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem in AD 50. It was decided that Gentile Christians were not to be burdened with Jewish rules—for also the Jewish Christians knew they were not saved by their observance of the laws of the old covenant, but only through faith in Jesus' gift of salvation. However, tensions over this question continued for some time. The Church in Rome included a large number of Jewish Christians, so Paul addressed the matter in his letter, speaking to the tensions between the “weak” and the “strong.”

97. As Paul wrote about them, who were the “weak” and who were the “strong”?

98. As Paul described the disagreement over sacred days and dietary rules, what was he mainly concerned about?

99. What principle for Christian living did Paul assert in dealing with this matter?

100. How could both sides in this issue be right?

101. Why did Paul expand his argument in this to include general statements about a Christian's living and dying to the Lord?

102. How are matters of indifference—matters simply of choice—to be decided in the life of a congregation?

Paul followed this with strong encouragement not to judge your brother in such matters. He reminded them—and reminds us—that each of us must stand before God's judgment seat. Paul bolstered this argument for the Jewish Christians by quoting Isaiah 45:23—and for the Gentile Christians, he added his own "each of us will give an account of himself to God." We will not give an account of the brother's actions; he will have to do that. But we will be accountable for our own approach to Christian discipleship and our expression of Christian freedom.

Lesson 7

Proper 20

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 20:1–16

This is another of the parables found only in Matthew’s Gospel. It offers us a straightforward lesson, the point of which is not hard to determine and understand. It is helpful, however, to see it in context. During His interaction with the rich young man who wanted to know what he had to do to get eternal life (Matthew 9:16–30), Jesus had challenged him to change the whole focus of his life by giving his wealth to the poor and coming to follow Him. The young man had gone away sad, “for he had great possessions” (v. 22). Then Jesus had turned to His disciples to say, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (v. 24). And they had responded, “Who then can be saved?” (v. 25).

Jesus had given the needed direction to His disciples’ thinking by responding to their question: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” Peter then boldly—and honestly—said, “We have left everything and followed You. What then will we have?” Read Jesus’ response in verses 28–30.

103. What privileged position did Jesus promise His apostles? How did He expand His assurances to include all of His followers?

Jesus ended His comments with a *mashal*, a pithy, cryptic statement intended for mulling over and chewing on. He repeated it at the end of this parable, so the parable surely is an expansion of what had preceded it.

A denarius was the usual pay for a day laborer, who usually worked from sunup to sundown, 6 a.m.–6 p.m., to earn his pay. Often his ability to feed his family for another day depended on his being hired. The point of Jesus’ parable hinges on the landowner’s hiring workers at various times during the day and then paying them all the same wage, a denarius.

104. What was Jesus teaching about the Kingdom with this parable? What would be a comparable situation in the life of the Church today?

105. What was Jesus warning against by having the landowner ask, “Do you begrudge my generosity?” (20:15).

106. In the light of the parable, interpret Jesus' *mashal* that "The last will be first, and the first last."

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 55:6–9

Isaiah 55 is the prophet's invitation to the thirsty—his call to the exiles to remember and take seriously the Lord's covenant and to enjoy the wonderful gifts of His grace "without money and without price" (v. 1). If they would, He assured them, "You shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace" (v. 12). He wanted them to believe that their restoration to their homeland was assured by the Lord!

Isaiah encouraged decisive action with his "___ the LORD" and "___ upon Him."

107. What thought is added by "while He may be found" and "while He is near"? (See Psalm 145:18; 2 Corinthians 6:1–2.) What was to be a necessary part of their seeking the Lord and calling on Him? What assurance did Isaiah give to encourage the turnaround he called for?

108. What practical application did the Lord's declaration that His thoughts and ways are higher than theirs have for the people of Judah in exile?

109. When have circumstances in your life made God especially near and accessible to you?

110. What gives us assurance that God really is always near and accessible to us? (See Hebrews 10:19–23.)

111. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 1:12–14, 19–30

Paul wrote to his friends in Philippi while he was under house arrest in Rome, awaiting his first trial in Caesar's court. It is a letter of thanks for their latest gift to him, help with his expenses in

Rome. His letter is called “The Epistle of Joy”—the word *joy* occurring sixteen times in various forms.

Philippi was named after Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great. It became a prosperous Roman colony located on the Via Egnatia, the main highway between Rome and its eastern provinces. Many retired legionnaires had settled there because its status as a colony gave Roman citizenship to all residents. The congregation in Philippi was predominantly Gentile and cultivated a special relationship with Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

In his letter, Paul reported about his situation in Rome and about his expectations regarding continuing his apostolic mission. In fact, he told them that his house arrest had actually ____, and that the whole palace guard had come to know that his ____.

112. Within the Church, what had been the surprising result of Paul’s incarceration?

113. What part did Paul tell the Philippian Christians they played in his anticipation of deliverance and continued service? What was Paul’s main concern for himself as an apostle of Jesus during his incarceration and at his trial in Caesar’s court?

114. How is Paul’s attitude toward life and death an example for us to imitate? What convinced Paul that the Lord had more for him to do in his apostolic ministry?

115. How did Paul show his secure confidence in the love and esteem in which the Philippian Christians held him?

Paul’s only indicates his major concern. Paul was ready to leave his future in God’s hands. If it was not what he anticipated, he did not want his friends in Philippi to be dismayed, but to be strong in their faith and commitment to discipleship. Historians generally agree that Paul was acquitted and released and was able to carry out his planned mission to Spain—and probably was able to visit his friends in Philippi again. A few years later, he and Peter were caught in Nero’s persecution and martyred.

116. What are the key factors in a manner of life that is “worthy of the gospel of Christ”?

117. What did Paul say would be the effect on those threatening them when the Philippians would stand firm in the Gospel and not be frightened when they were put on the spot for their faith? What effect would it have on their fellow Christians? Is this double effect still felt today when Christians stand firm in the face of martyrdom?

118. What worldview strengthens Christians to be able to stand up and be counted in the critical moment?

Lesson 8

Proper 21

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 21:23–32

Jesus had entered Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowd because He deliberately fulfilled the ancient prophecy about the meek King who would come riding on a donkey. He had cleansed the temple area, driving out the concessionaires who were buying and selling there, and overturning the tables of the moneychangers.

As Jesus continued to teach in the temple courts, the chief priests and elders approached Him with their challenge: “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” Jesus, as He often did, just turned their question back to them by asking them about John the Baptist and his calling people to repentance and Baptism; they had not acknowledged John as a prophet from God. “From where did it come? From heaven or from man?” Jesus asked. When they wouldn’t give Him a definitive answer, Jesus said He would not answer their question either—which implied that He would not accept their authority to question Him. Then He told the parable of the two sons, another parable found only in Matthew, in the temple courts on Monday or Tuesday of Holy Week.

119. Jesus’ parable was aimed at the chief priests and elders, but it forces us to do thoughtful introspection too. What is the point of the parable?

120. What was “the way of righteousness” in which John came to the people? (See Matthew 3:1–2; Luke 3:7–18.) How were the tax collectors and the prostitutes like the first son in their approach to the Kingdom? How were the religious authorities like the second son? What does this parable say to us for our life as Christians?

We can readily see ourselves in the attitudes and actions of both sons. We do say no to God’s clear commands at times and then repent and try again to do His will. At other times we say a willing yes and then never get around to carrying out our intentions and promises.

121. Which do you find more difficult to correct in your Christian living, a no that resists or rejects God’s call and command or a yes that has trouble getting beyond words and good intentions? What is required in both instances? (See Galatians 5:22–25; 6:7–10.)

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32

There is no getting away from the fact that the behavior or lifestyle of one generation influences and affects the behavior and lifestyle of the generation to follow. Sociological studies have shown that abusive behaviors such as child abuse, spouse battering, and alcohol and drug use are often perpetuated from generation to generation in a family. Those who suffered under the abusive behavior of their parents, instead of avoiding that behavior as adults, sometimes repeat it and become abusers themselves.

This is true also regarding relationship to God and the adoption of spiritual values. Parents who model Christian faith and love provide an atmosphere in which their children may grow into that faith and love for themselves. Parents who are indifferent to God may be influencing their children to a similar indifference. (See Exodus 20:3–6.)

People need to understand this principle to understand the influence that their parents, grandparents, and others have had in shaping their outlook and behavior, and they need to understand that any pattern can be changed. But sometimes people use understanding this to excuse themselves from personal responsibility instead of working to break and change unhealthy patterns.

122. How were the exiles in Babylon doing this with their proverb about the land of Israel? With what principle did the sovereign Lord respond through Ezekiel? How did the Lord make His pronouncement very weighty?

123. In what respect is the principle of individual responsibility a very positive, not a negative, principle?

124. Why were the exiles saying “The way of the Lord is not just”? What does the principle of personal responsibility say to such an attitude?

125. What was offered by the Lord through Ezekiel as the solution to the problems of those who were blaming their fathers’ sins and the Lord’s “unjustness” for their situation? (See Ezekiel 11:17–20.)

126. What does it say about God that He has “no pleasure in the death of anyone”? (Compare 18:23.)

127. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 2:1–18

“So if” Paul stated this in a number of ways as he brought encouragement to the Philippian Christians to grow in living as disciples of Jesus.

128. What is the basis of all the “ifs”? What were the “thens” that he suggested should follow the “ifs”?

129. Why was Paul so concerned that the Philippian Christians be one in mind and love and spirit and purpose? What happens when members of a Christian community act out of rivalry or conceit?

130. In what sense does humility lead Christians to consider others “more significant” than themselves? (See Mark 10:35–45; Romans 12:10.) What is Paul suggesting with looking “to the interests of others”? Whose attitudes are we to imitate in our perception of ourselves in relation to others?

The lofty poetic verses that describe Christ Jesus and His approach to life and service are thought by some scholars to have been a creedal statement that was already in the liturgy of the Early Church. Theologians mark this section as “a seat of doctrine.” It describes more fully than any other Scripture the state of humiliation or humbling of the eternal Word as Jesus, our Brother and Savior, and the subsequent state of exaltation of Jesus, our Brother and Savior, at God's right hand.

131. What does this section make clear about Christ Jesus from the outset?

So while these words say that the One who is in very nature God “made Himself nothing,” there is no suggestion that He lost His essential nature as God. Jesus, also in His state of humiliation, was in very nature God. But He did not fully use His power nor display His majesty as God. In humble obedience to the will of God for the salvation of sinners, He emptied Himself to take on the nature of a servant.

132. How far did His obedient service take Him? Why was this obedient servant then exalted to the highest place? What is significant about the fact that it is now the name *Jesus* that is above every name, at which every knee will bow? How is it true that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord?

133. How can we grow in developing a humble, serving attitude like that of our Lord Jesus?

134. What is suggested in Paul's writing "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling"? What is the dynamic involved in this?

135. What will grumbling and questioning do to our working out our salvation?

A drink offering of wine or blood often accompanied the sacrifices offered in the temple, even those offered by others. Paul used this analogy with his "if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith." He could indeed have been executed as a result of his trial in Caesar's court. Paul wasn't worried about that, and also in that situation, he would be glad and rejoice—and he wanted his friends in Philippi to feel the same way. Paul had already turned over all control of his life and his future to his Lord and Savior.

Lesson 9

Proper 22

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 21:33–46

Jesus was interacting with the Jewish religious authorities. He had forcefully cleansed the temple and now was teaching there on Monday and Tuesday of Holy Week. The Jewish leaders challenged Him to declare by what authority He was doing these things. Instead, Jesus told the parable of the two sons, turning the focus on them. His parable exposed their unwillingness to go beyond an outward yes of formal religion in their relationship with the Lord. He followed that parable with this parable of the tenants, in which His incisive judgment moved beyond their spiritual shallowness to their outright rejection of Him as the Promised One—and their resultant loss of the kingdom.

As usual, His story was easy to understand. The practice of renting out vineyards to tenant farmers was well known. In such an arrangement, the tenants gained a place in which to live and work and shared in the harvest at an agreed-on percentage. The landowner benefited by having his vineyard properly cared for and made productive for him. The imagery Jesus used was also familiar, for it was drawn from Isaiah's picture of Israel as the Lord's vineyard, today's Old Testament Lesson.

136. Who were the “tenants” assigned the task of caring for the Lord’s “vineyard”?

137. What was pictured by the “owner” sending his “servants” to collect his fruit and finally sending “his son”?

In telling the parable of the two sons (Matthew 21:28–32), Jesus forced His hearers to interpret it by asking, “Which of the two did the will of his father?” (v. 31). Using the same technique here, He forced them to pronounce the judgment against unfaithful “tenants”—against themselves.

138. Why did Jesus quote Scripture as He moved from their analysis of His story to applying it specifically to them as the “tenants” of the “vineyard”?

Quoting from Psalm 118, Jesus changed His analogy. Cornerstones were key stones in ancient buildings, establishing the line of the walls and tying them together. Stones for this purpose were carefully examined, and flawed stones were rejected. The Greek for “rejected” is from the word used for testing coins to determine if they are genuine. As Jesus applied the words of the psalm to the

Jewish leaders, He was forcing them to see that they had examined and tested Him and had decided that He was a counterfeit messiah. But with the psalm He stated clearly that He would be shown to be the promised Cornerstone.

139. How does the analogy of the rejected stone that became the cornerstone complement the point of His parable? Who are the people to whom the kingdom of God will be given? What is the difference between the results of “one who falls on this stone” and “when the [stone] falls on anyone”?

140. Did the parable and Jesus’ application of it have the effect He desired? How may we apply this parable to the Church today? (See 1 Corinthians 4:1–2; 3:10–15.)

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 5:1–7

Isaiah was God’s prophet in Jerusalem during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Politically, the Kingdom of Judah was under the threat of mighty Assyria. Isaiah encouraged confidence in the Lord’s help and discouraged the pursuit of political alliances. The Assyrian conquerors swallowed up the Northern Kingdom, Israel, and then came against Jerusalem. Isaiah encouraged King Hezekiah to trust the Lord, and God’s angel went out and slew 185,000 Assyrians and forced their withdrawal. Isaiah, however, continued to point to Judah’s ultimate doom under God’s judgment, condemning their false confidence that was based simply on the fact that the temple stood in Jerusalem and its worship rituals were being continued. Isaiah 1–39 ends with Isaiah pointing ahead to Babylon as the instrument of Judah’s fall.

The prophecy of Isaiah provides some of the loftiest formal prophetic literature in the Old Testament. Because of Isaiah’s assurances of God’s rescue of the remnant and his detailed description of the Suffering Servant, the promised Savior, Isaiah is called “the evangelist of the Old Testament.” This song of the vineyard is unique in prophetic literature in its use of a parable and its “love song” style. Horace Hummel says in *The Word Becoming Flesh*, “It is widely supposed that Isaiah played the role of a troubadour, singing a sort of love song in order to first attract attention for his judgmental punchline, and that certainly would not be out of character for all that we know of prophetic behavior” (p. 201).

141. Since the song depicted the Lord’s love of Israel, what is suggested by “He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it”?

142. Why was it appropriate for the Lord to expect it “to yield grapes” from His people? What was going to happen because they yielded only “wild grapes”? (See Deuteronomy 28:15–24.)

The contrast between the “grapes” the Lord expected and the “wild grapes” His people produced is stated in verse 7 in a play on words. The words sound alike in Hebrew: He looked for “justice,” *mishpat*, but found “bloodshed,” *miespah*; for “righteousness,” *sedeqah*, and heard “an outcry,” *se’aqah*.

143. What does it say to us that God’s expectations of fruit are described in terms of our interaction on the horizontal, human level? (See Isaiah 1:10–17; Micah 6:6–8; 1 John 3:16–18; 4:19–21.)

144. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 3:4b–14

All of Paul’s letters include warning against the influence of Judaizers, Jewish Christians who insisted that Christianity is a matter of “Jesus plus”—faith in Jesus plus compliance with the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. They went to Gentile churches and told Gentile Christians that if they wanted to be real Christians, they, in effect, had to become “Jewish” Christians. Paul warned the Philippian Christians to look out for “the dogs,” “the evildoers,” and “those who mutilate the flesh” (v. 2). He insisted, “We are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (v. 3).

Then, in today’s Epistle, he declared that he was born of orthodox parents who circumcised him on the eighth day, was of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a zealous Pharisee, obedient to the Jewish laws, faultless as far as legalistic righteousness. He said, “If anyone else thinks he has reason for ____, I have more.”

145. Why did Paul emphasize his qualifications as a Jew so strongly even though he was writing to this Gentile congregation in Philippi?

146. How did Paul describe his goal in life as a Christian?

147. How could “a righteousness of my own that comes from the law,” to which he had formerly devoted his life, become “loss” and “rubbish” to Paul as compared to “that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith”? (See Romans 3:19–24; 7:18–19.)

148. What is the significance for our own lives when we make Paul's phrases our own: "I have suffered the loss of all things . . . that I may know [Christ]," "and the power of His resurrection," "and may share His sufferings," "becoming like Him in His death," and "attain the resurrection from the dead"?

149. Why does running the race as a disciple of Jesus require that we forget what is behind and focus our attention on the goal before us?

Note the contrasts in Paul's phrases: "I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own" and "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Compare John 15:16.)

150. What comfort is there for us in what Paul expressed in this way? What challenge?

Lesson 10

Proper 23

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 22:1–14

It was Monday or Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus had forcefully cleansed the temple court of merchants and moneychangers and was teaching in the temple. Representatives of the religious leaders approached Him, demanding that He tell them by what authority He taught and did His miraculous signs and bold acts. Instead, Jesus confronted them with their own religious attitudes and actions through a series of parables, the last of which is today's Holy Gospel. With the parable of the two sons, He exposed the shallowness of the yes they were saying to God—no deeper than words and outward appearance. With the parable of the talents, He accused them of being unfaithful in their responsibilities as religious leaders, rejecting the Lord's call through prophets like John the Baptist and rejecting even the Son He had sent—all so they could perpetuate the religious system in which the “fruits of the vineyard” went to them. This parable of the wedding banquet then ended the confrontation and spurred the Pharisees on in their plotting to get rid of Him.

151. What was Jesus trying to make the people and the religious leaders aware of with the parable of the wedding banquet? What does it say about “the king” that he sent out repeated invitations to those originally invited to the feast? What shows the serious consequences of rejecting the king's invitation to the feast?

In God's gracious will and purpose, the “wedding feast” for His Son will indeed have its full complement of guests—and not always those we might expect to be there.

152. How is it that “both bad and good” were accepted and welcomed to the wedding hall? Since both “bad and good” will be at the feast, how must we understand the king's saying, “Those invited were not worthy”?

The part of the parable that deals with the wedding clothes is an epilogue that adds its own point. In that society it was not unusual for the wealthy to provide their guests with festive garments for such grand occasions. This relieved the guests of expenditure on their part and underscored the expansive generosity of the host. Our English “had no wedding garment” is not as expressive as the Greek, which is a passive form meaning “not having been garmented”—in other words, not wearing the garment the king supplied.

153. What is this wedding garment, and why is it essential that everyone at the banquet be clothed in it? (See Isaiah 61:10; Revelation 7:14; 19:7–8.) Why will all who appear without this festive garment be “speechless,” without excuse?

154. In the light of the parable, interpret Jesus’ closing *mashal*: “Many are called, but few are chosen.”

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 25:6–9

Chapter 24 ends with the promise that “on that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. . . . [F]or the LORD of hosts reigns on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem” (vv. 21, 23b). These surely were reassuring words. Assyria had conquered the Northern Kingdom, Israel, and had deported major elements of the population for settlement elsewhere. Her armies then pressed southward into Judah, overwhelming its northern villages. Jerusalem itself was threatened. Isaiah steadfastly prophesied that Jerusalem would be saved and encouraged its people and their leaders to trust in the Lord instead of political alliances.

In chapter 25, the prophet praises the Lord for this assured deliverance. Its first verses use terminology that called to mind the Lord’s strength in fighting for Israel in the destruction of Jericho and the conquest of Canaan and His mercy toward Israel in settling them in the Promised Land. Verses 6–9, the heart of the chapter, give to the praise an eschatological, universal thrust.

155. Which mountain was Isaiah referring to with “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food”?

156. What is “the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations”? What is especially striking about the fact that Isaiah says that it is on this mountain that the Lord of hosts will “swallow up death forever”?

157. For whom will the sovereign Lord wipe away the tears from their faces and take away their reproach? (See Revelation 21:1–4.)

158. What impact is added by the prophet’s ending with “the LORD has spoken”?

The lesson ends with a short song of praise that displays the attitude of all who have been tested and have learned that the Lord's promises are sure and certain. Read the words aloud together: "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, that He might save us. This is the LORD; we waited for Him; let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation."

159. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 4:4–13

This familiar pericope has been read on the Fourth Sunday in Advent from ancient times and is still part of the One-Year Lectionary on that Sunday. It contributes to Philippians being called Paul's "Letter of Joy."

The joyous fellowship of the congregation in Philippi evidently was being disturbed by a squabble between two of the women (vv. 2–3). Paul urged them to settle things and "agree in the Lord" and encouraged his "true companion," evidently the congregation's elder or pastor, to intervene pastorally to help them resolve the problem.

160. Paul's encouragement to peacekeeping led him to point to an important part of the dynamic of making peace. What does it mean to rejoice in the Lord? What impact was added for his friends in Philippi by the fact that Paul wrote this encouragement to rejoice while he was in custody awaiting trial in Caesar's court?

161. How does the fact that the Lord's return is near encourage us to gentleness in our dealings with others, yielding our "rights" rather than insisting on them?

Paul wrote, "Do not be anxious about anything." The Greek for "anxious" carried the idea of a mind being drawn in different directions, not focused or assured. We all know what that is.

162. What does Paul prescribe for anxiety? What is not to be forgotten as we bring prayer and petitions to God? How will our consciously giving thanks to God influence our whole outlook on life?

163. What blessed results will be gained from practicing such a conscientious spiritual exercise? Why will the peace of God surpass all understanding as it guards our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus?

You are what you think! Long ago the writer of Proverbs said, “He is like one who is inwardly calculating” (23:7). We know today that the brain operates much like a computer in terms of its being “programmed” by what is fed into it. That’s why Paul urges us to “program our computers” with good things by focusing our thoughts on what is just and pure—life’s positive values. This is encouragement to nourish the peace of God that guards our hearts and our minds. Living in “the era of communications,” we are surrounded by the various media by which the world’s message comes to us—and often it is inconsistent with Christian values. The world promotes materialism, secularism, self-centeredness, and loose, permissive morality—things at odds with the peace of God. Is this serious? One man has said, “It is a law of psychology that when unconscious suggestions come into conflict with conscious thought, the unconscious almost always wins control of our wills when we are not looking.” Our focusing on what is good requires firm discipline and dependence on the Lord, for evil easily intrudes into our consciousness and can be very attractive. (See Romans 7:14–23.)

164. What can we consciously do to keep bombardment by the world’s amoral and immoral communication from breaking down the walls of our “peace of God”? (See Romans 7:24–8:4; Ephesians 6:10–17.)

Paul’s special relationship with the Philippian Christians is highlighted in the last paragraph of the pericope. He thanked them that they had found the ___ to renew their ___ for him. Paul then used himself as an example to teach Christian contentment.

165. What is the secret for a Christian to be content “in any and every circumstance”?

Lesson 11

Proper 24

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 22:15–22

Matthew's account of the life and ministry of Jesus focused more and more on the confrontations between Jesus and the religious authorities that would finally lead to His death. Jesus was no longer avoiding it, for His hour was at hand. If anything, with His parables and their application, He was pushing His opponents toward taking action against Him. Matthew says, "Although they were seeking to arrest Him, they feared the crowds, because they held Him to be a prophet" (21:46). In today's Holy Gospel, we see the Pharisees approaching Jesus with a plan by which they felt they could trap Him. Luke called these men "spies, who pretended to be sincere" (20:20). The disciples of the Pharisees brought with them some Herodians, members of a political group that contended for rule of Judea by one of Herod's line instead of direct rule by a Roman governor. Normally the Pharisees opposed the Herodians because the Herodians approved payment of taxes to the Romans, but at this time they wanted witnesses who had some political influence.

166. Why did the Pharisees think they "had" Jesus with their question, no matter which answer He might give?

167. Why did the Pharisees approach Him in such an effusive, complimentary fashion?

Jesus' response, by which He avoided their trap, was simple and direct. Once again, He made them supply the answer to their question themselves by asking them a related question. Then He precluded any further argument with His "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Luther and others pointed out that as Christians, we live in two kingdoms, and we have responsibility to God in both kingdoms.

168. In what sense are these two kingdoms exclusive of each other? How are they also inclusive for us as Christians?

169. How are we today called on to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”? (See Romans 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17.) Explore some biblical ramifications of what it means for us to give “to God the things that are God’s” by reading Psalm 29:1–2; John 6:28–29; Matthew 10:32–33; Acts 1:8; 2 Corinthians 9:6–11; and Matthew 25:34–40.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 45:1–7

This lesson has the Lord speaking to Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, as His “anointed.” The Hebrew word refers to one set apart for a special task, in token of which perfumed olive oil was poured on his head—as David was anointed as a lad to be the future king of Israel. The preceding verse (44:28) refers to Cyrus as the Lord’s “shepherd” who will accomplish what the Lord pleases. It has Cyrus “saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’ and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’ ” Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BC and did indeed allow a remnant of the Jews to return to Judea under Zerubbabel, a prince of the Davidic line, to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.

170. According to this pericope, what was behind the rise of Cyrus from king of a small nation to conqueror and ruler of all the Middle East?

There is no historical indication that Cyrus ever acknowledged Yahweh as his God. The Cyrus Cylinder, on which was found a record of his triumphs and glories, credits his god, Marduk, with all of this.

171. In what way did Cyrus acknowledge Yahweh?

Yahweh is pictured as the dominant factor in all of history—the one and only God who “form[s] light and create[s] darkness” and who “make[s] well-being and create[s] calamity.”

172. What is God’s ultimate purpose in guiding the destinies of men and nations?

173. How may we incorporate into our lives a greater sense of God’s providential guidance, even through circumstances of which we are not aware? (See James 4:13–17.)

174. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

Thessalonica was a bustling seaport, an important communications and trade center, located at the junction of the east-west Egnatian Way and the road leading north to the Danube. With a population of about 200,000, it was the capital and largest city of the Roman province of Macedonia.

Acts tells of Paul's coming to Thessalonica from Philippi, where he and Silas had been beaten and imprisoned. As was his custom, Paul went to the synagogue, where he reasoned from the Scriptures, proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, and proclaimed, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ" (Acts 17:3). When some Jews and a large number of Greek God-fearers were persuaded by Paul, the Jewish leaders became jealous, rounded up some rowdies, and started a riot. When the magistrates investigated, the rulers of the synagogue accused Paul of saying that there was another king, one called Jesus.

It may be that official warnings about Paul and his Gospel had been sent to synagogues throughout the area by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. At any rate, Paul met fierce opposition also in Thessalonica—and when he was forced to leave, the new Christians of Thessalonica were harassed and persecuted as he had been. Paul heard of this as he worked in Corinth. He wrote to encourage them to remain steadfast and to find their hope in the grace of God.

175. How did Paul immediately express his personal concern for the Thessalonian Christians? Why had these Christians been able to work and labor and endure even though harassed and persecuted?

176. What was their "work of faith"? What was their "labor of love"? How did their hope inspire steadfastness?

177. What did Paul point to that convinced him that the Thessalonian Christians were among those chosen by God? How would Paul's assuring them that they had been chosen in itself encourage them to stand firm and endure?

178. What role did their remembrance of Paul play in all of this?

179. In your life as a Christian, who provided a model of Christian lifestyle that encouraged you to imitate him or her?

Paul encouraged the Thessalonian Christians by praising them for becoming “an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.”

180. What do the example of Paul and the reputation of the Thessalonian Christians challenge you to aim at in your life as a Christian in your family? in your church? in your workplace and your community?

181. What do you think is the reputation of your congregation among its sister congregations in your area?

Lesson 12

Reformation Day

The Holy Gospel: John 8:31–36

This familiar pericope is part of a section in which Jesus was interacting with Pharisees who were questioning the validity of His teaching. Many, however, believed Jesus as He said, “I do nothing on My own authority, but speak just as the Father has taught Me. And He who sent Me is with Me. He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him” (vv. 28–29).

It was for these neophyte believers that Jesus had instruction and encouragement. To truly be His disciples, they were to _____. Then they would know the _____, and it would set them _____. First steps need to be followed by additional steps. Hearing the Word of Jesus must be followed by abiding in His Word.

182. What does abiding in the Word of Jesus involve us in as His disciples?

183. What will a growing realization of the truth bring to effect in us? What kind of freedom was Jesus promising here? How is that freedom to be expressed in the lives of Jesus’ disciples? (See Galatians 5:13; Romans 6:15–18.)

Jesus’ antagonists interrupted with “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone.” They were not talking about political freedom; the Jews had long suffered subjugation under powerful conquerors. Jesus responded with one of His “truly, truly, I say to you” statements.

184. How did Jesus’ “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” expose the falseness of their taking security in “We are offspring of Abraham”?

185. What is the point of Jesus’ comparison of “a slave” and “a son”?

It is the Son, whose Word is the embodiment of truth, who is able to set us free indeed. And Jesus’ words make it clear that He is that Son—and that in Him we are truly free! The Greek is *eleutheroi*, “free men”—far more than liberated slaves who have become “freedmen.” By grace,

through faith, we become sons and daughters in the family of God, brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, and will belong to the family of God forever.

The First Lesson: Revelation 14:6–7

186. What is the significance of the messenger’s flying “in mid-heaven,” as the Greek puts it? Why is his message called “an eternal gospel”? To whom does the messenger proclaim this eternal Gospel?

This lesson is appropriate for Reformation Day. Since the time of the Reformation, Luther and other reformers have been seen in these angel messengers in Revelation. They returned the Church to a focus on the Gospel truth—the Good News that assures God’s children of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus’ completed work of redemption, and not by religiosity and its works. (See Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:15–16, 21.)

187. Are the pastors and teachers of the Church of today represented by this angel messenger in Revelation?

188. How may we all see ourselves as this angel with the Gospel to be Good-Newsed to all?

189. How does the angel messenger’s announcing that “the hour of [God’s] judgment has come” relate to the eternal Gospel he proclaims?

190. How does this First Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 3:19–28

Paul had quoted from Old Testament Scriptures at some length. With phrases like “None is righteous, no, not one” (v. 10), “All have turned aside” (v. 12), “The way of peace they have not known” (v. 17), and “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (v. 18), he pointed to the universality of human sinfulness and its depravity. Now he turned to God’s solution.

It begins with seeing that the human predicament is beyond our ability to rectify. Paul asserted that the demands of the Law are placed on all, Jew and Gentile alike. No one is exempt; arguing is futile; all are accountable to God. Instead of the Law being a way to life for those who try hard to be

obedient, it only makes them conscious of their sin. And that is especially true for those who take the Law very seriously. As a result, “by ___ no human being will be ___ in [God’s] sight.”

“But now . . . ” said Paul. God has another answer to this dreadful human condition: “the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.” This, too, Paul said, was attested to by the Old Testament Scriptures, “the Law and the Prophets,” in their emphasis on faith. It is a righteousness of God that is through ___ for all who ___.

191. How did Paul point out that this new answer from God is universally needed and applicable? What motivated God to provide this righteousness apart from the Law? How was this righteousness of God apart from the Law brought into effect?

“Justified by His grace as a gift” is a key phrase. The *Concordia Self-Study Bible* (p. 1721) says,

Paul uses [justify] 22 times. . . . The term describes what happens when someone believes in Christ as his Savior: From the negative viewpoint, God declares the person to be not guilty; from the positive viewpoint, he declares him to be righteous. He cancels the guilt of a person’s sin and credits righteousness to him. . . . This legal declaration is valid because Christ died to pay the penalty for our sin and lived a life of perfect righteousness that can in turn be imputed to us. (See 2 Corinthians 5:21.)

“Redemption” is a related key word, a word taken from the slave market. It was the ransom paid to free a slave. Paul referred to our release from guilt and the sentence of death because Christ, in His death, became the ransom for us.

“A propitiation by His blood” referred to the Old Testament’s Day of Atonement. Having offered sacrifice for his own sins, the high priest entered the Most Holy Place with blood of the animal sacrificed for the sins of the people and sprinkled it on the Mercy Seat, the cover of the ark of the covenant. The Septuagint called the Mercy Seat the *hilasterion*. In this text, “propitiation by His blood” is *hilasterion*. In effect, Paul was saying that Jesus is our Mercy Seat, the “place” where we receive atonement.

192. The result of redemption through Christ’s blood is that all human ___ is excluded. How would the law (principle) of works itself exclude boasting? How is boasting excluded even more by the law (principle) of faith?

Paul’s Letter to the Romans formulates the Christian doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Christ more fully than any other New Testament book. Luther referred to this Epistle as the chief part of the New Testament and the purest Gospel. Paul proclaimed justification by faith against all legalistic works-righteousness. Luther interpreted the sense of Paul’s words and added “alone” in his translation, and *sola fide*, “by faith alone,” became a cardinal principle of the Reformation. In closing this study on Reformation Day, let’s speak together a paraphrase of Paul’s great assurance:

“God’s Word has convinced us that we are justified by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone—and our obedience to the Law or our disobedience does not even enter into the consideration of our being right with God.”

Lesson 13

All Saints' Day

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 5:1–12

Matthew organized his Gospel in ways that would help him teach the Christian faith and life. At the outset, as he got into Jesus' ministry, he provided the Sermon on the Mount, a summary of Jesus' teaching about the righteousness of the disciple. Jesus insisted that faith is more than sentimental "believing" or merely intellectual agreement with theological propositions. It involves a relationship with Him that is expressed in a godly lifestyle that honors Him. The classic analysis of faith listed three ingredients: knowledge, assent, and trust. One Christian teacher has quite properly added action. In Christian discipleship, faith always acts on the basis of its trust in God's good will.

Scholars identify five "books" in Matthew, delineated by the phrase "when Jesus finished these sayings." In this first book, the Sermon on the Mount, the ending emphasizes Jesus' unique qualities as the Teacher sent from God: "When Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at His teaching, for He was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes" (7:28–29).

The Greek says, "He sat down and He opened His mouth and taught them, saying . . ." This was the classic way of introducing a teacher's setting forth something of vital importance. It says, "Sit up and take notice! This is Jesus' official teaching!" The nature of Jesus' kingdom is immediately evident. Things are turned around, the opposite of what we expect—but consistent with the surprising Good News that God loves sinners and wants us to find new life in Him. The eight statements are called the Beatitudes because each begins with "Blessed."

Both John the Baptist and Jesus called out, "Repent!" The first "Blessed" echoes that call and pertains to those whose poverty of spirit has produced true repentance. *Ptochos*, "poor," is from a verb that describes cringing or crouching like a beggar. Pride is the antithesis of this poverty of spirit and prevents the proud from being blessed.

193. What blessing do the poor in spirit receive?

"Those who mourn" care deeply about the seriousness of their own sins, about sin, injustice and perversion in the world, and about the suffering they and others experience because the world is "out of sync" with its Creator.

194. Just how are such mourners comforted? (See John 14:18–19.)

The "meek" are the gentle, the patient, the humble, those who are strong enough to not assert themselves selfishly at the expense of others. They are the opposite of the "go-getters" who move up even if they have to step on a few others. Note that the promised blessing the meek are to receive is

“the earth”—a blessing for this life, not just for eternal life. But it is generally our human experience that it is the aggressive who grab the earth for themselves.

195. In what sense do God’s meek ones “inherit the earth”? (See Matthew 6:25–34.)

God’s basic, most valuable gift is “righteousness”—being right with Him through Christ and right with others in Christ. “Hunger” and “thirst” are present tense in the Greek, suggesting “keep on hungering and thirsting.”

196. Why must this hungering and thirsting for righteousness be continual?

The Greek word for “satisfied” is very emphatic. It was used for feeding and fattening cattle by giving them all they will eat and more!

197. Where is the Lord’s “filling station” for this blessing?

The first four beatitudes look toward God. The next three look toward other people, citing virtues that disciples of Jesus display in their interaction with others.

198. Of what does “blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” remind you? Consider the opposite. What does one who is unmerciful and unforgiving reveal about how he feels about himself?

199. What is the source and basis of a Christian’s purity of heart? Paul said we will see God “face-to-face” in heaven. How do the pure in heart see God now as part of their daily life experience?

200. Why is it the peacemakers who are called “sons [and daughters] of God”? What limits are there in this matter of peacemaking? (See Romans 12:18; Luke 12:51–53.)

The final blessing involves being persecuted because of righteousness, suffering because of Jesus. Suffering for Christ leads Christians to ___ because it is evidence of a sincere identification with Christ. (See John 15:18–21.)

God’s ways and the world’s ways are usually antithetical. State this by working through the Beatitudes in this way: Jesus said, “Blessed are ___,” but our world says, “Blessed are ___.”

The First Lesson: Revelation 7:2–17

The four angels stand as potential destroyers of the whole earth and as protectors of those God will seal as His own. Then appears the angel with the seal of the living God to be placed on the foreheads of the slaves of our God—in contrast with the mark of the beast on the worldly. The *Concordia Self-Study Bible* (p. 1955) explains the total of 144,000: “[This is] not a reference to members of actual Jewish tribes, but symbolic of all the faithful believers on earth. . . . Everywhere in Revelation, 12 is the number associated with the church. Twelve squared is 144. One thousand is 10 cubed, a number for completeness” (see Galatians 3:26–29).

This is followed by John’s vision of the great multitude in white robes standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb, holding palm branches and expressing their praise.

201. Who are the ones in this multitude? How is it that they wear white robes and carry palm branches and are privileged to stand before the throne and in front of the Lamb? Why are they called “a great multitude that no one could number”?

202. To whom do they offer their praise? What do they focus on in their praise? Who then affirms their praise and joins them in praising God?

Those who interpret symbolic visions of this kind literally see “the great tribulation” as a specific time of distress preceding a millennial rule of Jesus on earth. Narrative sections of Scripture, however, never speak of a preliminary, earthly rule, but warn that the end will “come like a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:2 and others). They do, however, predict a time of great stress for followers of Jesus as the end approaches. The “multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” includes *all* who have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”—Christians of every era who have, through much tribulation, entered the kingdom of God (see Acts 14:22).

203. What is it that occupies this multitude from every part of human society?

The words “He who sits on the throne will shelter [literally, ‘spread His tent over’] them with His presence” is a reference to the tabernacle with its *Shekinah*, its cloud of glory that assured the Old Testament people of God’s presence among them. The vision of John makes it clear that full awareness of God’s presence with us will be a hallmark of life in the eternal kingdom. (See Revelation 21:1–3.)

204. How are the blessings of heaven described here in negative terms, as things withheld or removed?

205. What will be the great positive of the heavenly experience?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 John 3:1–3

The opening words of this pericope are an exclamation about the kind of love the Father has given us in Christ, which may be seen in the fact that we are called children of God. John was writing to Christians, most of whom had no status in the eyes of the world. The majority of those who became Christians in the first-century Greek world were slaves. They could be treated badly or disposed of at the will or whim of their masters. The Gospel of God's love in Christ had brought them a wonderful sense of personal worth. God's Son had been made sin for them so they could be made the righteousness of God in Him! But they were feeling pressure. Even in the Church, they were being put down by the "super-spiritual." In the world, they were beginning to feel official persecution for confessing "Jesus is Lord!" and, as a result, rejecting the requirement to worship the emperor as a personification of the divine spirit of Rome.

206. In what ways is it still true today that the world that does not know God does not know the disciples of Jesus as children of God?

207. In what ways may the feeling of being put down or one-upped even by other Christians still be a problem in the life of the Church?

The Bible doesn't give us a lot of details about the eternal life that God promises. Here John wrote, "What we will be ____." His words encourage us to recognize that for now, it is sufficient to know that "we are ____."

208. What assurance is added by John's "when He appears we shall be like Him"?

John then returned to an emphasis of the importance of living out who we are in Christ. We are to purify ourselves just as He is pure.

209. What does John point to as motivating factors in purifying ourselves to become more like Jesus in our daily living?

Lesson 14

Proper 25

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 22:34–46

Jesus “had silenced [literally, ‘muzzled’] the Sadducees” refers back to what precedes this pericope. The Sadducees were modernists, a Jewish sect that had in many ways accommodated itself to Greek thought and culture. They enjoyed some political influence, for they had curried the favor of Rome. It was by Roman permission and appointment that a Sadducee was high priest, and their sect controlled the attendant bureaucracy. Of the sacred Scriptures, they accepted only the five books of Moses, and those largely in principle. Influenced by Greek philosophy, they rejected the concept of a resurrection of the dead. Read Matthew 22:23–33 to see how Jesus evaded their elaborate attempt to show Him up, and, in the process, decisively supported the truth of the resurrection of the dead.

Pharisees were traditionalists, defenders of the covenant faith as it was expressed in all of the sacred Scriptures and in the ceremonial laws. In their legalism, they had developed a hedge around the Torah, a system of 613 detailed regulations, 248 that were positive in thrust and 365 that forbade things. They figured that strict observance of these regulations would keep them from “trampling” on the Law. The people generally respected the Pharisees for their religious dedication. Leading Pharisees occupied seats on the Sanhedrin, the high Jewish Council, so they, too, enjoyed some political clout. There was considerable tension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The question of the resurrection was a continuing source of arguing between them—and the Pharisees were very pleased to hear that Jesus had confounded and muzzled the Sadducees on this point.

“Which is the great commandment in the Law?” It’s a question you might expect from Pharisees. They probably argued this among themselves over and over—though they, too, had keyed in on the great principles to which Jesus pointed. (See Luke 10:25–27.) In meeting their test, Jesus simply quoted the *Shema*, the Jews’ creed, from Deuteronomy and added its related horizontal thrust from Leviticus.

210. In what sense did all of the Law and the Prophets (all of the Old Testament Scriptures) depend on these two commandments?

211. How do the two great commandments relate to the covenant of blessing and its fulfillment in Jesus?

212. Why must the second great commandment always be considered right along with the first? (See 1 John 3:16–18; 4:19–21.)

Having answered their question with divine insight and authority, Jesus turned to the Pharisees with a question of His own about the promised Christ. They answered correctly that the Christ is “the son of David.” (See 2 Samuel 7:11b–17, 25–29.)

213. In quoting Psalm 110, what additional, important instruction was Jesus providing regarding the Christ?

214. How did all of this relate to Jesus’ continuing confrontations with the religious authorities? (See Luke 19:37–40; John 10:22–39.)

215. What was the result of Jesus’ instructing the Pharisees about the Christ?

216. How do Jesus’ words here give added meaning to our faith and added direction to our lives?

The Old Testament Lesson: Leviticus 19:1–2, 15–18

The ethical requirements and ritual commands embodied in chapters 17–26 of Leviticus have led to this section being called “The Holiness Code.” *Kadash*, the Hebrew word for “holy,” carried the meaning of being “different from” or “separate from.” The Lord is holy in His being entirely different from and completely separate from evil. He is sometimes referred to as “the Wholly Other.” Observing the prescribed rituals and following the ethical and moral precepts of this Holiness Code would make God’s people, Israel, “holy”—obviously different from the Canaanites, whose base immorality and heartless violence had brought down God’s total judgment on them. (See Leviticus 18:24–30.) In being “holy,” the people of Israel were not only expected to be different from their pagan neighbors, but were also clearly warned to stay separate from them.

217. Why is respect for mother and father so important that it is listed first and is the first commandment of the second table of the Ten Commandments?

218. Why was the observance of the Lord's Sabbath emphasized so strongly?

219. In what ways does showing partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great pervert justice?

220. How are both slanderous words and careless actions destructive?

221. How did God's Old Testament requirements show His concern for things deeper than just outward behavior?

222. How does failing to rebuke a neighbor for his wrongdoing make you share in his guilt? (See Ezekiel 33:7–9.)

223. What kinds of attitudes and actions are called for by the command "Love your neighbor as yourself"?

224. Why did the Lord repeat "I am the LORD" and "I am the LORD your God" again and again as these commands were given?

225. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 2:1–13

Paul trusted the Gospel of God's grace in Christ as God's gift to all. In his ministry, he welcomed Gentile believers into the Church by Baptism with no requirement of circumcision or

obedience to the dietary rules of the old covenant. This disturbed many of the Jewish Christians, who expected that acceptance of Jesus, their Messiah, would mean that all Christians would become “Jewish Christians.”

The disagreement of traditionalist Jews with Paul had already been manifested in their outright opposition to his approach and in their efforts to undercut his apostolic authority in the churches he had established. When he visited the Galatian Churches, Paul had seen the results of their Judaizing legalisms in the doubts sown in the minds of the believers. It prompted him to write his Letter to the Galatians, which perhaps even predated 1 Thessalonians. Galatians is called “the Christian Magna Carta.” In it, Paul proclaims the certainty and the effectiveness of faith-based Christian freedom in contrast to the uncertainty and ineffectiveness of a law-based religion—even when the legalism is a matter of a “Jesus plus” that prescribes rules as an addendum to faith in Christ. When Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, he had learned that the Judaizers had been spreading their destructive views also there—slandering his person, discounting his work, and disturbing the faith of the new Christians.

Paul defended his ministry among the Thessalonian Christians. He insisted that his appeal to them to believe and trust Christ did “not spring from ___ or ___ or any attempt to ___.” His words evidently were chosen to counter the suggestions of the Judaizers that Paul was not genuine in his message because he was not genuine in his apostleship—not having been one of those who had walked with Jesus.

226. How was Paul “approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel”? (See Acts 9:1–30.)

227. Paul insisted he was speaking “not to please man, but to please God.” How might he have appeased and pleased those who were his critics in Jerusalem if he had wanted to do that?

228. Paul’s enemies evidently suggested that he had offered the Gentiles an “easy faith” in order to benefit monetarily from them. How had Paul’s work among them shown the Church in Thessalonica that he had not come “with words of flattery . . . nor with a pretext for greed”? (See v. 9.)

229. What did Paul work at in order to provide for himself while serving as missionary to the Gentiles? How is it that Paul, an educated man from a wealthy family, was equipped to do that kind of work with his hands?

230. Paul insisted that the apostles had a right to be paid for their service. Why, then, did he make it his policy to support himself instead of expecting those he served to provide for him? (See 1 Corinthians 9:3–6, 15–18.)

231. In what sense was Paul's relationship with the Thessalonian Christians that of "a father with his children"? What was Paul most grateful for regarding the response of the Thessalonian Christians to his work among them?

Lesson 15

Proper 26

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 23:1–12

Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, attracting some of the crowds of pilgrims who were there for the Passover celebration. Representatives of the Pharisees were always near, looking for ways to discredit Him and opportunities to arrest Him. With His “hour” at hand, Jesus criticized their hypocrisy openly and followed it with a series of seven “woes” that He stated publicly and directly to them.

The scribes, teachers of the law, were Pharisees who had become professional students of the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus pointed out that they “sit on Moses’ seat.” This said that as they read and expounded the sacred Scriptures, they represented God and were to be heard and obeyed, but since they preached but did not practice, they were not to be imitated.

232. What terrible judgment did Jesus make about the motive of Pharisees in practicing their legalistic religion? What is the only reward realized by people who are religious just to impress other people? (See Matthew 6:2, 5.)

Pharisaic tradition had developed 613 regulations that were intended to be a hedge around the Law. By obeying these regulations, they felt they would be kept from trampling on the Law. They imposed these regulations on the people as well, reducing the spirit of joyful obedience to God’s commandments to compliance with burdensome regulations and technicalities.

Phylacteries were “prayer boxes” that were strapped on the forehead and the arm by a Jewish man for his time of prayer. They contained small parchments with key passages from the Old Testament. Their use was a literal application of Deuteronomy 6:8. Instead of just wearing them during the time of prayer, however, many Pharisees wore them constantly. Jesus judged the ostentatious religiosity of these self-righteous Pharisees right in their presence. As examples, He cited their making their phylacteries ___ and their fringes ___, loving the ___ at feasts and the ___ in the synagogues, and loving to receive ___ in the marketplaces and being called ___ by others.

Jesus turned to His disciples—no doubt continuing loudly so that the crowd and the Pharisees would hear. In this context, His contrasting instruction for those who were His own would have impact also for the Pharisees and would serve to underscore His judgment of their Pharisaic hypocrisy.

233. What was Jesus’ point in telling His disciples they were not to call one another “rabbi” or “father” or “instructor”? Does this rule out the use of titles of respect in the life of the Church?

234. What title, what reputation, is most important for a Christian to pursue in his or her life in the Church? Why is that the case? (See Matthew 20:26–28.)

235. Why must it be a truism in the Kingdom that those who exalt themselves will be humbled and that only those who are led to humble themselves will be exalted?

The Old Testament Lesson: Micah 3:5–12

236. What did Micah say would be God's judgment against false prophets and seers? How did Micah contrast himself with the false prophets? How did his message to the people of Jerusalem set him apart from the false prophets and validate his identity as a true prophet of the Lord?

237. How pervasive was the corruption among the professional leadership in Jerusalem? What was the greatest sin of the leaders as they carried out their duties in corrupt, self-serving ways?

238. In what way would the corruption of the leaders become the downfall of the people they were to serve? How were the people of Jerusalem contributing to the problem as they went along with the corrupt system? What would be the end result for Jerusalem and the temple in which they had put their trust?

239. What warning does this lesson sound to our Church leaders today? What does it say to the Church's members?

240. How does this lesson tie in with the emphasis of today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12

Timothy's report to Paul in Corinth evidently revealed the need for renewed instruction and direction and encouragement of the Thessalonian Christians by Paul. In these first twelve verses of chapter 4, he addressed two areas in which there were some problems: in their involvement in and practice of sexual morality, and in their proper practice of brotherly and sisterly agape love.

Franzmann, in *The Word of the Lord Grows*, reminds us that these Christians had come out of and still lived in "a Gentile environment, and in a Greek harbor town at that, where the idea of sexual purity was a complete novelty" (p. 68). It's not surprising that they were having difficulty turning away from the sexual immorality that had been a socially approved part of their lifestyle in the past. Paul reminded them that God's will for them was that they be sanctified—set apart for God (just as the temple had been sanctified, set apart as God's dwelling-place). He taught that the bodies of Christians are the temples of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us. (See 1 Corinthians 6:19–20.)

241. In his instruction about sexual morality, Paul moved from the threat of God's punishment of the wrongdoer to God's call to a new way of life. How do these two thrusts work together to motivate Christians to a proper response?

The bottom line for disciples of Jesus is obedience to God's will. Paul began his approach to this sensitive instruction with "we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus," and he closed it with "whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives His Holy Spirit to you."

Paul approached the problems in the congregation's practice of brotherly and sisterly love by affirming that the love was there but needed fine-tuning in some areas. Evidently some were frantically working others up with their views, were butting into the business of others, and were not working to provide for themselves. They had become busybodies who were disturbing the peace of the congregation.

242. What was Paul's concern in telling such busybodies to live quietly, to mind their own affairs, and to work with their hands?

243. How do internal squabbles in a congregation get to be offensive to outsiders?

Lesson 16

Proper 27

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 25:1–13

The parable of the ten virgins warns Christians to be wise and watchful, ready for their Lord's return in glory. Combine it with the parable of the talents, which follows it, and you know clearly that Christian watchfulness is not a matter of lazy waiting, but calls us to faithful use of all Jesus has entrusted to us as we work and wait expectantly for Him.

The story base of the parable is that of a grand Jewish wedding. In Jewish society of that day, it was the betrothal, the formal agreement between two families or two individuals, that was the legally binding action. Though the betrothed continued to live in their separate homes and families for a time—sometimes for as long as a year—they were legally husband and wife. Then, on a scheduled evening, the bridegroom and his friends went in festive procession to the home of the bride to bring her and her maiden companions in procession to the groom's house for the consummation of the marriage with its days of wedding festivities. This story speaks to all Christians (ten is the Bible's number of completeness) as we watch and wait for our heavenly Bridegroom to take us, His Bride, the Church, to the heavenly wedding feast.

244. What is the point around which the parable turns?

245. What is the oil that will ensure that our lamps, our lives, will be burning brightly when Jesus returns as Bridegroom and King?

246. What is suggested by the fact that all ten thought they were ready for the bridegroom, but the foolish ones learned only when it was too late that they were not properly prepared for his coming? (See Matthew 7:21–23.)

247. What is stressed by the fact that the wise virgins could not share their oil with the foolish ones?

248. Where can we get oil for our life-lamps that will have them burning brightly with faith, hope, and love as we wait for our Lord? (See Matthew 11:27–30; 2 Timothy 3:14–17.)

A daily practice of Dr. Horatio Bonar reminds us that we should live with a sense of urgency as we watch and wait. His last act each night before lying down to sleep was to draw aside the curtain and, looking up into the night sky, ask, “Tonight, Lord?” In the morning, his first movement was to look out the window at the dawn and ask, “Today, Lord?”

The Old Testament Lesson: Amos 5:18–24

Amos, whose name means “burden” or “burden bearer,” was God’s prophet to the Northern Kingdom, Israel, 760–750 BC—some thirty years before its fall to Assyria. Amos explained that he was not a professional prophet, but had been a farm worker in the wilderness of Judah when the word of the Lord came to him and he was ordered to go and preach to Israel. Israel was enjoying a time of prosperity, but the prosperity only tended to encourage her religious and moral corruption. Idolatry was practiced alongside the worship of Yahweh at Bethel; there was extravagant indulgence in luxurious living; immorality was rampant; there was frequent corruption of judicial procedures; and oppression of the poor was the order of the day. All the while, the people of Israel and their leaders clung to a false sense of security because of their empty religious rituals. They saw their prosperity as evidence of the Lord’s approval and blessing. Amos called them to repentance and warned that God’s patience with them was at an end.

249. What were the expectations of the people as they waited for the Day of the Lord? How did Amos try to burst their bubble of false expectation?

250. What point did Amos make with the man running from a lion, only to be confronted by a bear, and a man entering a house and leaning against a wall, only to be bitten by a serpent?

251. How could the Lord say “I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies” and “I will not accept [your offerings]” when He was the one who had commanded them to carry out such religious duties?

252. What did the Lord point to as prerequisites for acceptable worship?

253. What is suggested by the rolling waters and the ever-flowing stream in terms of God's people offering Him acceptable worship?

254. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

It is evident in the New Testament that many of the first generation of Christians expected the return of Jesus in glory during their lifetime. In Thessalonica, some even quit working and just spent their days talking about and waiting for Jesus' coming. In time, they became a burden to the other members of the congregation, and Paul dealt frankly with them in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15.

As time passed and Jesus did not return and some of the Christians died, there was concern that those who were not alive to greet the returning Lord would miss out on the promised glory. Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians to allay these fears and to instruct them in more detail about the hope of eternal life that is shared by all Christians—those living and those who have fallen asleep in the Lord. We who live almost two thousand years after Jesus promised “I will come again and will take you to Myself” (John 14:3) are surely blessed by Paul's words. It is understandable that they have been included in the traditional Order of Burial for Christians.

255. What is implicit in Paul's speaking of the death of Christians as their “falling asleep”?

256. What hope sustains us as Christians and makes our grieving for departed loved ones different from the grieving of “others . . . who have no hope”? What is the solid basis of this hope? (See 1 Corinthians 15:17–23.) What assurance is there for us in Paul's “God will bring with [Jesus] those who have fallen asleep”? (See 2 Corinthians 5:1–10.)

257. Why did Paul emphasize that Christians who are alive at the time of the Lord's coming will have no advantage over those who have fallen asleep?

258. What is the point of the “cry of command, . . . the voice of an archangel, and . . . the sound of the trumpet of God” at the time the Lord will come down from heaven?

259. What is the significance of being caught up in the clouds and meeting the Lord in the air to be with Him forever? (See 1 Corinthians 15:50–57.)

Lesson 17

Proper 28

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 25:14–30

The parable of the talents is the second of three parables in Matthew 25, all of which tell what the kingdom of heaven is like and relate especially to Judgment Day. As we consider the parable, we must remember always that Jesus is that man and we are the slaves, bought at a price and entrusted with the message of reconciliation. (See 1 Peter 1:18–19; 2 Corinthians 5:14–21.)

260. On what does the point of Jesus' story turn? What does it say that the man gave one servant five talents, another two talents, and another one talent?

261. What does it say to us that the servant who gained two more talents for his master heard the very same commendation as the servant who gained five more?

We must keep in mind that it is faithfulness in using what He has entrusted to us that is honored by the Lord. And we need to remember that it is He Himself who must provide the results that He is looking for. (See 1 Corinthians 3:5–11; 4:1–2.)

262. When the time for the accounting came, how did the servant who had hidden his master's talent in the ground show he knew he was without excuse? Why did the master call him not only "slothful" but "wicked"?

263. Is it fair that the one who already had ten talents was given the one that was wasted by the lazy, wicked one? Since he did not steal his master's talent but returned it to him, is it fair that the "worthless servant" is thrown "into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"?

264. What is the emphasis of this parable of the talents that speaks to us regarding our lives as Jesus' disciples?

The Old Testament Lesson: Zephaniah 1:7–16

The introduction to Zephaniah in the *Concordia Self-Study Bible* says,

The key term in Zephaniah, which means “Yahweh hides” or “Yahweh has hidden,” is “the day of the LORD.” After describing the judgment on the day of the Lord [a day of divine vengeance on the idolatrous covenant nation], the last chapter presents salvation on the day of the Lord, when God will gather his people and reign in victory. . . . The prophet declares: “Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD” (3:9 [NIV]). . . . Since Jesus alludes to Zephaniah (1:15) in reference to his second advent (Matthew 24:29), these promises refer ultimately to that event, and clearly it is the Messiah who will fulfill the prophecies—as a result of the grace of God. (p. 1399)

265. What attitude does the prophet encourage people to have as they contemplate the nearness of the Day of the Lord?

266. Verses 8–11 describe the devastation of Jerusalem—“the day of the LORD” that was near at hand for its inhabitants and is evidently referred to by “the LORD has prepared a sacrifice.” In that light, who are the “guests” the Lord has “consecrated”?

267. What was at the heart of the complacency of the people of Jerusalem? What is pictured with the words “Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them”?

The description of the destruction, the misery, and the sense of futility that will accompany the Lord’s judgment on the great Day of the Lord clearly refers to the conquest of the city of Jerusalem. Then, however, the picture is expanded to the climactic judgment of the whole world. It uses plurals to say “a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements.” No one will escape the judgment to be meted out on the climactic Day of the Lord. The New Testament describes the end of the present age and the beginning of the new: “the new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells.” (See 2 Peter 3:10–13.)

268. How does this lesson tie in with the emphasis of today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

The Thessalonian Christians were troubled by some who were sure that Jesus would come almost any day. Some had quit working and had become end-times busybodies.

269. What is the one thing Paul could say and they could know for sure about the coming of the Lord?

Paul wanted them—and us—to face up to the reality of Christ’s sudden, surprising, final return without fear. His words remind us to be ready always. And they let us know that the way to be ready is to live as “children of ____, children of the ____”—in contrast with those who are “of the ____ or of the ____.”

Paul emphasized self-control as important if we want to be alert and ready. This is a good time to remember that self-control is one of the fruits of having the Holy Spirit live in us. Those who live in the light not only enjoy Christian self-control but even Spirit-led self-control. (See Galatians 5:22–23.)

270. What three Christian characteristics will help us maintain this Spirit-led self-control and live our lives in the light?

With Paul’s encouragement ringing in our hearts, let’s bring today’s study to a close by saying his words together: “God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with Him.”

Lesson 18

Proper 29

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 25:31–46

When Jesus referred to Himself in relation to His saving work, He usually avoided the title *Messiah*, which means “the anointed one.” *Christ* is the same word but from the Greek language. Among the Jews it had been associated mainly with the promise of a kingly messiah who would establish David’s throne forever. It had taken on definitely political overtones as they longed for someone to free them from Roman domination.

Jesus usually referred to Himself as “the Son of Man.” Also “Son of Man” was a messianic title drawn from Daniel’s prophetic vision, but it was not as commonly used—and surely was not suggestive of a glorious earthly kingdom of Israel, as “messiah” could be construed to mean. In Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats, a picture of the final judgment, the full thrust of the apocalyptic meaning of “Son of Man” comes through. His story is about the coming of the Son of Man, accompanied by all His angels, to sit on His throne in heavenly glory.

271. What is the obvious purpose for which all nations will be gathered before the glorious Son of Man on His throne? On what basis will He separate the sheep from the goats? (See John 3:16–18, 36.)

It is important to note that the King’s “Come, you who are blessed by My Father” to those on His right and His “Depart from Me, you cursed” to those on His left, as well as His words about their serving Him or not serving Him, all are spoken after the separation has already taken place. Martin Franzmann says in *Follow Me*: “Before a word is spoken or any deed of man is told, the Shepherd separates the nations and places them at his right hand and his left. He is the Judgment in person; the Christ Himself divides” (p. 183). (See Luke 12:49–53; Matthew 10:34–39.)

272. Since the separation and its eternal consequences had already been determined, why does the King make such a point of “as you did/did not do it to one of the least of these My brothers”?

273. Whom does He mean by “the least of these My brothers”? What is the point of His saying, “As you did/did not do it to one of the least of these, My brothers, you did/did not do it to Me”?

Franzmann adds in *Follow Me*:

Whether a man has been for Him or against Him has shown itself, not in men's pious sentiments but in their deeds. And the King, the righteous Judge, unrolls the history of men before all eyes to show how the verdict which His action has pronounced has long since been written by the deeds of men. All deeds of mercy done to the least of these whom He in mercy calls His brethren have been a Yea to Him. . . . All deeds of mercy left undone have been a Nay to Him. (p. 183)

274. What does this parable encourage in us, who rejoice that “one is justified by faith apart from works of the law”? (Romans 3:28; see also Galatians 5:6; James 2:14–26.)

275. What are some practical ways in which you can serve Jesus in serving the needy?

276. What if you were to take the approach “I’m saved by grace through faith; why should I bother to do works of service?”

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24

Ezekiel, whose name means “God strengthens,” was God’s prophet during the dark days of Judah’s exile in Babylon. Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. Ezekiel warned of prolonged judgment. The Jews were not to expect early release from exile, but were to work at being at peace with themselves and with the Lord in their circumstances in exile. However, Ezekiel also gave hope by speaking of the restoration God would bring His people.

Chapter 34 begins with the Lord taking the shepherds, the religious leaders, to task for being derelict and self-serving in the performance of their duties—to the detriment of the flock. They were told that they would be removed from their privileged positions. (See Ezekiel 34:1–10.) Then, in this lesson, the Lord promised that He would enter the situation and Himself become the faithful, caring Shepherd His people needed.

277. What are the two thrusts that would be embodied in the concern the sovereign Lord would display upon becoming the Shepherd of the sheep? (See Luke 15:3–7; Psalm 23.)

278. What does this say to us about the responsibilities of all who want to serve faithfully as this Shepherd’s under-shepherds?

279. When would the promised restoration of the Shepherd's flock take place?

We fully appreciate a loving Shepherd who searches for the lost and brings back the strays, who builds up the injured and strengthens the weak, but it surely is strange to hear the Shepherd say, "The fat and the strong I will destroy." It is not just shepherds but also the sheep who come under the judging scrutiny of the sovereign Lord as the Shepherd. See what He says to the sheep in verses 17–22.

280. Since David had been dead for more than three hundred years when Ezekiel prophesied, who is "My servant David" who would be the "one shepherd" of God's flock and "prince" among God's people?

281. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 15:20–28

Paul knew that the Greek Christians were not stumbling over the resurrection of Jesus Himself, the Word made flesh, so much as the idea that all of them, as ordinary Christians, would also be raised from the dead. So he had confronted their doubts with a straightforward argument: "If the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (vv. 16–17).

Paul insisted that the facts of the matter were clearly seen in the historical evidence to which he had pointed them. "In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." The New Testament is unequivocal in its testimony to the bodily resurrection of Jesus. In the Greek text, Jesus says, "A spirit does not have flesh [*sarx*] and bones [*ostea*] as you see that I have." These words unmistakably affirm His full humanity also in His resurrection body, as did also His invitation to His disciples to touch Him and His eating in their presence. (See Luke 24:36–42.)

Today's American Christians must contend with the ideas of New Age offshoots of Greek philosophy and Eastern religions, which speak of the immortality of the spirit, sometimes through many reincarnations. The final goal in their systems is to be released from the cycle of earthly existences and to be absorbed again into the universal spirit. The Christian hope that Paul and the other apostles propounded, however, is more than an immortality of the spirit. It is the resurrection of the body, the whole human being, to a continued personal identity in the new heavens and new earth.

282. Of what does Jesus' becoming "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" assure us?

283. To underscore the victory Christ has won for us, Paul contrasted it with the human predicament. He wrote that “by a man [Adam] came death” and “in Adam all die.” What is the theological term for this universal human condition of sinfulness and death?

284. Paul followed that with “by a man [Jesus Christ] has come also the resurrection of the dead.” Why was it essential in God’s plan of salvation for humanity that a man, His Son in human flesh, share our experience of death and rise again in victory?

285. The victory of Jesus over death took place at a point in human history, AD 30, and at a specific geographic place, outside the walls of Jerusalem. When and where will the victory be fully displayed and the last enemy, death, be destroyed for all people?

286. When Christ “delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power” and “the Son Himself will also be subjected to Him who put all things in subjection under Him,” will this be a demotion for the One who has been highly exalted and given the name that is above every name? What is Paul saying in this? (See Revelation 5:11–14; 11:15.)

Leader Guide

How to Use the Leader Guide

Put in time and effort to make these thoughts your own. Notes on your Study Guide will help you remember them in class. If you think a point is stated particularly well in the Leader Guide, you may want to quote it, but do not use the Leader Guide continually as the last word. Your group's ideas about themes and emphases and applications may differ from those in the Leader Guide. That's okay; explore their insights. Since each study is a unit in itself, you may easily use substitute leaders. Provide them with a Study Guide and Leader Guide, along with instructions for their use, well in advance.

Each lesson in the Leader Guide begins with the collect assigned for the day. You may use this prayer or another prayer suitable for your needs to begin your study. Suggested also are the hymns and songs, listed topically in the index of *Lutheran Service Book*, appropriate for the season or day. The index begins on page 993.

Lesson 1

Proper 15

Almighty and everlasting Father, You give Your children many blessings even though we are undeserving. In every trial and temptation grant us steadfast confidence in Your loving-kindness and mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 15:21–28

1. The woman's approach to Jesus at least says that she was religiously aware of Jewish faith and hopes. It does not necessarily imply that she was a "God-fearer" or a proselyte. Jesus did not respond immediately simply because He was in the territory of Gentiles and did not want to give a wrong impression. He had not turned away from His people, nor from the position that God's promised salvation was to be through Israel. The disciples may have been showing some Jewish prejudice against a Gentile and a woman, but probably they were just getting uneasy and self-conscious about the situation in which she was putting them. Picture it: thirteen Jewish men walking as a group through Gentile territory, being followed by a local woman who called loudly to them for help and even used Jewish religious terminology. That surely made them the focus of everyone's attention.

2. Jesus came to be the fulfillment of the messianic covenant, so He directed His own ministry and that of His disciples to His own people, the Jews. His destiny in God's plan of salvation was for Him to complete the meaning of the entire sacrificial system of the old covenant, becoming the Lamb of God in His suffering and death in Jerusalem. Through fulfilling the covenant promise to Israel, He would become the Redeemer of the world—and call people from all nations to be His chosen people, His spiritual Israel.

3. Gentiles were well aware of the Jews' attitude toward them. They knew that Jews often referred to them as "Gentile dogs"—unknown strays as compared to the Jews, who were God's chosen people. Jesus' use of this metaphor, even with softened wording, might have stirred up resentment in the woman, but it didn't. She was even ready to repeat the metaphor, asking only, like a dog, to eat some "crumbs" of the love God had for His Jewish people.

4. Jesus helped the woman because of her persistent faith. She looked expectantly to Him and was not discouraged when He seemed to put her off.

Martin Franzmann says in *Follow Me*:

Jesus' words on "great" and "little" faith are also a delineation of faith as relatedness to its object. He called the faith of the Canaanite woman a great faith . . . because it saw a greatness and a fullness in God's grace which made that grace sufficient for Jew and Gentile both. . . . When He rebukes His disciples for their littleness of faith He removes their thoughts entirely from any consideration of the

bigness of their *believing*. Not the subjective act of believing, but the relatedness of faith (any faith, so it be faith) to that which is faith's object, to the omnipotent and gracious God, is the basis of the unrestricted promise. There is no human cause commensurate with the effect at all. The mustard seed moves mountains because the mustard seed encloses God. The cure for little faith lies, therefore, not in whipping up within oneself a higher energy of believing but in a desperate turning toward the Person who is faith's object: "Lord, save me." (p. 142)

5. This incident says to us that no one is excluded from God's grace by merely outward circumstances—and that we have a great and loving Savior who will respond to our trusting cries for help.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 56:1, 6–8

Fill-in Answers: In speaking of the Lord's acceptance of foreigners, Isaiah specified acceptance of foreigners who would "join themselves to the LORD, to minister to Him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be His servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast My covenant."

6. These who would hold fast to the covenant, the Lord said He would "bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar." The temple would reflect this international thrust by being called "a house of prayer for all peoples."

7. This prophecy never really found its fulfillment in the temple in Jerusalem. Proselytes of righteousness were indeed allowed to worship and offer sacrifices in the temple, but they were a minuscule exception among the nations. The prophecy finds its real fulfillment in the "temple of the Lord" that is built of living stones out of every tribe and nation on earth—those who by faith come into true alignment with Christ, the Cornerstone.

8. The sovereign Lord's declaration that He will "gather yet others to Him besides those already gathered" speaks with assurance to us who are far removed in time and space and ethnicity from those who originally heard these words about being gathered by the Lord. It also encourages us to take part in the gathering process as we give our personal witness about Jesus to those around us and as we generously support the international mission of the Church with the Gospel. (See Ephesians 2:11–22.)

9. This Old Testament Lesson talks about foreigners being accepted and blessed in their relationship with the Lord; the Holy Gospel tells of one who was a harbinger of the movement of the Lord's kingdom into the Gentile world.

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 11:1–2a, 13–15, 28–32

Paul had said that he was ready to be "all things to all people" (1 Corinthians 9:22). This does not suggest duplicity on his part or unwillingness to take a stand for the truth. It showed Paul's readiness to meet people where they were with his message of full and free acceptance by God through Jesus Christ. He worked at not allowing inconsequential matters to become barriers to his ministry or message.

10. Paul's making much of his ministry to the Gentiles and its successes carried his hope that Jews would become envious of what was happening in the lives of these newly chosen people and that would make them want the blessings that Christ gives for themselves.

11. General acceptance of Jesus as Messiah by the Jews might have led to containment of the Gospel of the Kingdom as “a Jewish thing.” If the Church had been just a “messianic sect within Judaism,” as Judaizers wanted, the Church would have required Gentiles to become “Jewish Christians” by being circumcised and obeying the dietary restrictions. The Gospel of Jesus would have been as restrictive as Judaism had been, and Gentiles would not have been attracted. Few Gentile “God-fearers” went all the way to become “proselytes of the altar.” Jews’ rejection of Christ encouraged its proclamation to non-Jews and led to their reconciliation to God through faith in Christ. Paul had spoken of faithless Israel as being “hardened” by God (11:7–10). Those Jews who are led out of that spiritual rigor mortis to know and believe God’s grace in Christ truly are brought to life from the dead.

God’s gift and call are irrevocable, but God’s call was always a call to life in Him through the gift of faith. Paul had pointed to father Abraham as a prime example of justification by faith (Romans 4). The covenant blessing was not for those who were just physically descended from Abraham, but for those who shared his faith. (See Luke 3:7–8; Galatians 3:26–29)

Fill-in Answers: Help your group understand the equations: Israel’s disobedience (rejection of Christ) = God’s merciful outreach to Gentiles. God’s mercy to Gentiles = disobedient Israel’s turning again to God for mercy. (Saying “leads to” instead of “equals” may help in this understanding.)

These equations describe the dynamic that God, in His desire for all, was using.

12. God has let all people follow their sinful nature and be disobedient—the Gentiles in their time and ways, the Jews in their time and ways—so that all may see themselves needing, and eligible for rescue and restoration through His mercy in Christ. He does not deal with some one way and with others another way. Whether Jew or Gentile, salvation is to be found only in God’s mercy in Christ.

13. Invite your group to share how God has used His Word to make them more aware of their sin and unworthiness so that they have become all the more appreciative of His mercy in Jesus Christ. Focusing on sins of omission in this analysis helps. Giving your own testimony will encourage them.

Lesson 2

Christian Education Sunday

Lord Jesus Christ, You have entrusted to Your people the task of teaching all nations. Enlighten with the wisdom of Your Holy Spirit those who teach and those who learn that the joyous truth of the Gospel may be known in every generation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Luke 18:15–17

14. We may bring our children to Jesus through Holy Baptism, in which sins are forgiven and the Holy Spirit is given to live within them. That, of course, presupposes that we will then lead our children to personal understanding in their faith by leading them into salvation history in the Bible and by teaching them to pray. Our examples as we hear the Word in our homes and in church are vital in this.

15. We might hinder our children when in word or deed, in wrong actions or in neglect of what is right, we become stumbling blocks to them. Poor parental examples may become excuses for children to turn from Jesus in disinterest and doubt. (See Luke 17:1–2.)

16. The incident with the mothers and their little ones—and Jesus’ reaction—was a case in point for Jesus’ application of the parable: “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (18:14). Children receive gifts with straightforward trust in the giver. In like manner should we receive the kingdom of God.

The Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 6:4–15

17. Moses’ use and the Jews’ continued use of “Hear!” at the beginning of their creed said more than “Pay attention!” It was a continual reminder that their faith was a result of Yahweh’s revelation of Himself in the covenant of grace and blessing. We Christians will do well to keep this God-to-us revelation thrust in mind as we speak the great Christian creeds together. (See 1 Corinthians 12:3.)

18. Moses assured them that the result of revering and obeying the Lord would be that they would “multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.” Plenty of “milk and honey” characterizes the ideal life of people who had been living as nomads. Later promises of the Lord’s blessing were more fitting to a society that had become agrarian.

19. The summary commandment was “love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” What enabled their reverent obedience to the Lord was His gracious love expressed in the covenant initiated with Abraham and expanded to Israel as a nation. (See Genesis 12:1–3; Exodus 19:3–6.)

20. All the phrases used in connection with God's commands emphasize their importance in terms of daily living. Think through each with your group to recognize its specific impact. They combine to say we are consciously to make God and His Word a central part of our thinking and our conversations. Statistical studies of Lutheran families indicate that only in 20 percent are family Bible reading and prayer part of the family's routine. In another 20 percent, the family occasionally talks about God or about church. In 60 percent, talk about God and use of His Word are limited to time spent in church. Where would you and your family fit in this?

21. We use religious pictures, plaques with Scripture verses, crosses and crucifixes, ICHTHUS or other artifacts at our entries to indicate our homes are Christian homes, and we use many other items as reminders of our relationship with God in Christ and, occasionally, as aids to focus our attention in our devotions.

22. Two dangers to the Israelites' spiritual life were emphasized. First, there was the danger of becoming so self-satisfied when things were going well that they would forget about the Lord and their continual need of His presence and power in their lives. Second was the danger of involving themselves in the immoral worship practices of their pagan neighbors. Living as affluent American Christians confronts also us with the temptation to focus our lives on things, pat ourselves on the back for our supplying ourselves as we have, and look to the future with confidence that our prosperity will continue. Thus we may forget the Lord or reduce our relationship with Him to occasional formal, perfunctory worship. We, too, may be caught up in the political correctness of universalism, in which we see all religious faiths as ways by which people may come to God—and even involve ourselves in syncretistic worship with non-Christians. This surrounds us in America today and is a very present danger to us.

23. The Holy Gospel exalts the humility and trustfulness of children as examples in matters of faith. This lesson emphasizes the need to make worship of the Lord and study of His Word a part of our daily living—and also to lead our children and grandchildren to personal understanding in their faith.

The Second Lesson: Acts 2:37–41

24. When the people asked, "What shall we do?" Peter responded, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

25. The Holy Spirit must supply regenerating power for true repentance and faith. We remember Luther's "I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him." But Luther continued, "But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel." Our responsibility—always in the power of the Holy Spirit—is to lend our ears and our hearts attentively to the Spirit's call to repentance and faith, devoting ourselves diligently to the Word of God, and then, in the power of the Spirit, to proclaim that Word clearly and emphatically, trusting that the Holy Spirit will call people to repentance and faith.

26. Peter's call to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ involved his hearers in acknowledging Jesus as the promised Christ (Messiah). To be baptized in His name meant they were placing themselves under Jesus' authority as Lord. They would be confessing the basic sin of missing the mark in their rejection of Jesus as the promised Savior in favor of continuing to trust in what had become a works-oriented Judaism. Today's humanistic moralists continue to "miss the mark" for the same reason. Since Jesus came and accomplished salvation for all, there is one basic sin—rejecting Him who is the Savior from sin.

27. Those responding to Peter's preaching of the Good News on that day were devout Jews. They knew the promise of the Messiah and its assurances. They did not need extensive instruction; they needed only to look to Jesus in faith and acknowledge Him to be the Messiah. When the

Gospel is proclaimed in our world today, we cannot take it for granted that people understand the Word of salvation—even when they respond and say they believe in Jesus. So generally, they are given more thorough instruction in Christian doctrine before receiving Christian Baptism.

28. Peter's words about them and their children and those far off prepared the way for understanding that the Good News is for all and that the Lord calls young and old from every nation to be His own. Peter's words assure us that we are included in God's gracious salvation in Jesus Christ and that when we were baptized in Jesus' name, we, too, received the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. His words guide us to make our own change of heart and mind, our redirection of life, a continual reality in our Christian discipleship, and they guide us to reach out actively to others, even those far off, with the Gospel of Jesus.

29. Verse 42 tells us that at the center of the life of the Jerusalem congregation were "the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, . . . the breaking of bread and the prayers." "The apostles' teaching" was the teaching of Jesus, who had promised that the Spirit would remind them of everything He had said. (See 1 Peter 2:2.) "Fellowship" means their unity of faith and life in their commitment to Jesus—being His Body, attached to Him in faith as the Head and to one another in love as members of His Body. "The breaking of bread" is a reference to the Lord's Supper, celebrated in those days before it was more formalized in the worship life of the Church after eating their meals together. "The prayers" signifies their times of worship together, which probably followed a pattern they were accustomed to from Jewish tradition and from the synagogue worship. A life built around the Word and Sacrament in a Christian fellowship is essential for continuing in faith and discipleship. It becomes the soil in which we and our children mature and learn to bring forth the fruits of faith in our daily living. One may say, "I can worship God and the Lord Jesus anywhere." That may be true, but he or she probably doesn't do it. The New Testament does not speak of any private Christians who decline to be part of the Christian fellowship.

Lesson 3

Proper 16

Almighty God, whom to know is everlasting life, grant us to know Your Son, Jesus, to be the way, the truth, and the life that we may boldly confess Him to be the Christ and steadfastly walk in the way that leads to life eternal; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 16:13–20

A paraphrase of this incident shows that people still can load their views of Jesus with philosophical freight: Jesus asked at a pastoral conference, “Who do the theologians say I am?” They responded, “Some say you are the Ground of Being, others the Wholly Other, still others the Uncaused Cause.” Jesus, answering, said, “Huuhhh???”

The *humeis* statement emphasizes that Jesus turns to each of us with His question in the same pointed way.

30. Jesus was not anointed with oil but with the Holy Spirit, who came to Him in special measure at the time of His Baptism to empower Him for His mission as representative man.

31. Peter’s conviction about Jesus was not a result of his own human theological thinking but a result of divine revelation. Faith is a gift of grace through the power of the Spirit. Remember Luther’s “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength . . .” (Small Catechism: Third Article), which echoes Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 12:3 and Jesus’ words in John 6:44–45.

32. If Jesus spoke Aramaic to Peter, there was no gender distinction; the word is *cepha* in both instances. But it is Matthew’s Greek that provides us our inspired New Testament Scripture, and it clearly was written to prevent the interpretation that says Jesus would build His Church on the person of Peter. Jesus was pointing to Peter’s clear and explicit confession of faith—and finally to the One whom Peter was confessing as the Son of God, Jesus Himself—as the foundation of the Church. (See 1 Corinthians 3:10–11.)

33. “The gates of hell” refers to all the forces of evil that come through the gates of hell. The forces of hell will not overcome Christ’s Church because “the ruler of this world is judged” (John 16:11). The Creed’s “He descended into hell” is a statement of that victory of our Lord. It says that on rising from the dead, Christ went first to the very camp of the enemy to proclaim His victory (1 Peter 3:18–19).

34. Keys are used to unlock and to lock. It helps to think of a “right-hand key” as the Church’s proper function, opening heaven to the repentant, and a “left-hand key” as an adjunct function by which the Church puts evangelical pressure on unrepentant members. Both focus on a relationship with Jesus as the determining factor in life. (See John 3:16–18; 2 Corinthians 2:14–16.)

35. The Church loves to announce forgiveness to the repentant and makes this activity a formal part of its gathering for worship. The Church also has a responsibility to warn and to exhort

members caught in sins of commission or wandering carelessly from the fellowship of the Church. This is so important that Jesus carefully outlined the steps to be followed in this “church discipline.” (See Matthew 18:15–18.) Unfortunately, the left-hand key is seldom seriously used today, a situation that diminishes the impact of the right-hand key and encourages a “cheap grace” attitude in some. The left-hand key is to be used only in regard to evident sins.

All Christians use the Keys in their personal lives as they share the Word and Christ and forgive or admonish one another in His name. Parents, for example, may tell repentant children, “I forgive you, and Jesus forgives you too.”

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 51:1–6

36. The prophets frequently referred to the Lord Yahweh as Israel’s Rock. (See 26:4; 44:8.) This may be the case here too—reminding Israel of their roots in the Lord Himself as God’s chosen people. Isaiah’s usage here may refer instead to Abraham, however, for the thought is paralleled by “to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you.” To a nation discouraged by the Babylonian exile and the remnant’s prospect of rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple to their former glory, the reminder that Abraham was only one but became many in God’s plan for him said that though they were few and weak, the Lord could work out His will through them.

37. The wilderness being made like Eden and the desert like the garden of the Lord are familiar pictures of God’s blessing of His exiled people and the returning remnant. (See 41:118–19; 58:11.) The picture finds its ultimate fulfillment in the messianic kingdom. The result in the lives of God’s people would be that “joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.”

38. The prophet’s words point ahead to the New Testament era, in which God’s calling people to Himself and blessing them as His children extends to “the peoples” and includes those on the “coastlands.” This is climactically eschatological in that it prophesies the end of the age. (See 2 Peter 3:11–13.) The Lord’s assurance is this: “My salvation will be forever, and My righteousness will never be dismayed.”

39. This lesson points to the blessings to be brought by the Servant of the Lord. The Holy Gospel identifies Jesus as that promised Servant of the Lord.

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 11:33–12:8

Fill-in Answers: Paul exclaimed over the “depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!”

40. Knowledge is having information. Wisdom is knowing how to use that information. Wisdom is the needed extension if knowledge is to be useful, but knowledge is the base on which wisdom operates effectively. God is so rich in knowledge and wisdom, of course, that no one can plumb their depths.

41. Examples: the why and the how of God’s creation of all things; the why and the how of God’s creation of man in His own image; the why and the how of God’s determination to give man free will; the why and the how of His determination to reach out and rescue fallen mankind; the why and the how of the readiness of the One who knew no sin to become sin for us; the why and the how of God’s mysterious eternal election by grace of those who will be His own through faith in Christ; the why and the how of the Spirit’s power to turn hearts from rebellion to response through the Gospel; the why and the how of God’s choosing, calling, enlightening, and sanctifying me—and not some others—in Christ; the why and the how of God’s working in everything for the good of those who love Him, those who are called according to His purpose.

42. The progression: We do not know God’s mind or understand His will and ways. That being the case, we surely could never counsel or advise Him as to what He should will or do. In our limited understanding and wisdom (and in our sinfulness), we surely cannot give Him things or service by which we would obligate Him to us. We have to answer Paul’s questions: “We? No way! He is the infinite God; we are His finite creatures. We relate to Him only by faith, and we live in Him only because of His grace and mercy in Christ.”

43. Our praising, glorifying, and serving of God never make Him more glorious than He already is. Yet that is exactly what He wants us to do—for our benefit more than for His. God’s greatest glory is to be seen by us as our loving, forgiving Father through Jesus Christ. We underscore that glory when we “let God be God” and receive Him on the only basis by which we may receive Him—by grace alone—and give Him all the credit and glory in our relationship with Him. The best practical expression of glorifying God involves our public acknowledgment of Him as our Savior and worshiping Him as our Lord, as well as our sharing of the Good News of Jesus Christ by word and deed with those around us. (See 2 Corinthians 4:5–6.)

44. The Greek world’s philosophy of dualism said physical actions and activities did not really matter as long as one’s spirit was right. Paul, however, was asserting that God created, redeemed, and sanctifies the whole person: body, soul, and spirit. He is saying that spirit influences body and body affects spirit.

Fill-in Answers: Old Testament *latreia* involved offering dead animals; New Testament *latreia* requires Christians to offer our whole living selves.

45. Paul had offered motivation for transformation with his “by the mercies of God.” Here he said it will be effected through “the renewal of your mind.” (See Colossians 3:1–4.)

46. The process is experiential. By living in the will of God, we experience His truly beneficent nature.

47. God calls us to be no more and no less than He has gifted us to be. Arrogance has no place in the life of a Christian. We are to be content with the blessings we have received, but neither complacent nor boastful about how we use them to praise God and serve our neighbor. That sober evaluation and the attitude that results are needed in relationship with God and in our interactions with brothers and sisters in Christ. Blessings: we may count on the love, service, and forgiveness of others. Responsibilities: they can count on our love, service, and forgiveness. The variety in the Spirit’s gifts to individual Christians provides for all the needs of the Christian community in God’s gracious plan. (See 1 Corinthians 12:14–27.)

Lesson 4

Proper 17

Almighty God, Your Son willingly endured the agony and shame of the cross for our redemption. Grant us courage to take up our cross daily and follow Him wherever He leads; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 16:21–28

As Jesus talked about what lay ahead for Him, He said that He had to go to Jerusalem. The Greek word *dei* means “it is necessary.”

48. Peter became “Satan,” a stumbling block to Jesus, because he was suggesting that the way of the cross was not the right way to go. The Greek *epitiman*, “rebuke,” is a very strong word. Peter was trying to dissuade Jesus from what He had just said He must do.

49. In His testing in the desert by Satan, Jesus had also faced the suggestion that there was an easier way than His Father’s way; in Gethsemane, He showed that He had to contend with the human inclination to avoid suffering and sacrifice; after miraculously feeding the multitude, Jesus had to withdraw because they wanted to make Him their king by force; when some Greeks wanted contact with Him, Jesus was faced with the fact that He came to be the Savior of the world. Jesus’ times of testing were resolved through His use of the Word and prayer as Jesus committed Himself again and again fully to His Father’s will for the salvation of the world. Those resources are available also to us.

50. Anyone who wants to follow Jesus must deny Himself in terms of self-determination and self-service. These qualities were involved in the original sin, and Jesus calls us to find new life by renouncing self-will and our self-styled righteousness and accepting Him fully as both our Savior and our Lord. Our crosses are not just the tough circumstances that life may place on us or that may come because of our own foolish and sinful actions. Our crosses are those circumstances that are a direct result of our fellowship with Christ.

Jesus’ words force all of us to prayerful introspection to determine if our priorities are proper. Urge this personal exercise, and do it yourself.

51. A theology of glory, claiming the victory of Jesus as our own, is indeed a biblical theme. But when it is the major emphasis, it has built-in theological dangers. It pursues victory over life’s negatives now—which is biblical—but we must also deal with the continuing experience of Christians that we are at the same time sinners and saints. We are God’s holy sons and daughters through faith in Christ, but we are always still becoming what He wants us to be in daily living. When a theology of glory emphasis is materialized to the point of suggesting that it is God’s will that Christians be prosperous and healthy, what does this say to Christians whose experience is one of illness or handicap or poverty? Does it mean that they just aren’t believing strongly enough or that they haven’t committed themselves to Jesus fully enough—as some suggest? A theology of glory can

become a theology of doubt and defeat, in need of the Good News that Jesus loves us even when—and especially when—we know we are down and out and see that we are less than we would like to be.

52. A theology of the cross continually emphasizes the Good News that we live daily under God's grace and forgiving love—even with all our falling and failing. We need to know that. Christ's love then challenges us to take up our crosses in Christian faith, to give our identification with Him its deserved priority in life, to live new lives of holiness and service and be the best Christian disciples we can be—always with the assurance that when we fail, and we will, that He forgives us and lovingly puts us on the path of service again. (See Romans 8:1–4.)

53. Jesus says that when He comes in glory, “He will repay each person according to what He has done.” Our daily discipleship has eternal repercussions! How much more strongly can you stress its importance than that? Jesus' words may be seen as pointing ahead to His resurrection, His ascension, and His bestowal of the promised Holy Spirit on His apostles and on the Church. Some also take these words as a reference to the coming destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 15:15–21

54. Jeremiah's first utterances in the power of the Spirit excited him. He probably expected a positive response to them. He ate the Lord's words with joy and delight—like when we “devour” some book that has caught our complete interest.

55. “I am called by Your name” reminded the Lord that He had called Jeremiah and given him his message. Jeremiah had been faithful—and he wanted the Lord to be faithful to him.

56. Jeremiah had been ordered not to marry but to devote himself to his mission. He set himself apart for his work—and his work, its unpopular message, caused people to set themselves apart from him.

57. Jeremiah saw that he was making no headway convincing either the leaders or the people of Judah of the truth of his message. He felt their opposition would continue to make his life miserable and perhaps even lead to his death. Jeremiah began to wonder if the Spirit of God was forsaking him—the flow of living water he had experienced at first had become what he saw as “a deceitful brook” and “waters that fail.”

58. The Lord instructed Jeremiah: “Return. . . . Utter what is precious, and not what is worthless.” In other words: Stop complaining and get on with your mission! Jeremiah was not to turn to the people and adapt his message to their desires, but was to await their turning to him, their listening to and responding to his message.

59. The Lord assured Jeremiah that if he faithfully carried out his mission, he would be “a fortified wall of bronze” against which his hearers might fight but never prevail. The Lord would save, deliver, and redeem His faithful prophet.

60. Like Jeremiah, we are called by God and bear God's name; we are given inspired words; we are assigned to proclaim a message that is not popular; we get discouraged and “burn out” at times; we begin to question the Spirit-power of our message and mission; we complain to God; and, like Jeremiah, we hear our Lord's “Stop complaining! Repent! Get on with your mission! You are Mine! I will fortify you and save you!”

61. Jeremiah's situation easily relates to Jesus' call to carry our crosses and follow Him.

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 12:9–21

62. When we make it our aim to do what is honorable in the sight of all, we lessen the possibility of stirring up antagonism. This, of course, requires that we do what is right without making a show of it. A better-than-thou pose antagonizes rather effectively.

63. When we make it our goal to get even with someone who has hurt us, it means we are going to carry the hurt around with us and nurse it until it becomes bitterness within us. Health of spirit requires that we forgive the one who hurt us instead of trying to get even. Trying to get even displays an attitude that will affect those who have hurt us only by deepening their antagonism.

64. Consciously and formally turning the matter over to God releases us from feelings of hurt and the danger of a bitter spirit. Because feelings so easily return, we will probably have to turn things over to God again and again. In this spirit, we ask God to deal with those who have hurt us according to His will for them. He surely has His ways of standing up for us and can avenge the wrong if He wants to. But we should always remember that He wants to lead our antagonists to stand before Him in the same way we stand before Him—as recipients of His grace and mercy.

65. What will motivate us to overcome evil with good is the fact that this is the way God has worked in our lives. His Son overcame the evil consequences of our sin through His atoning sacrifice on the cross. His Holy Spirit overcomes the evil tendencies of our sinful natures by renewing our minds and leading us to new attitudes and actions. When we act lovingly toward those who hurt us, we do so because God acts lovingly toward us in Christ all the time. He may use our attempts at overcoming evil with good to accomplish just that—by leading those who are hurtful to repent and turn to Him. We are called to be like our heavenly Father, and Christ's love compels us to that goal.

Lesson 5

Proper 18

*O God, from whom all good proceeds, grant to us, Your humble servants,
Your holy inspiration, that we may set our minds on the things
that are right and, by Your merciful guiding, accomplish them;
through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with
You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 18:1–20

66. A question like this reveals the questioner’s feeling that he himself might qualify as the greatest. Jesus said we must become humble, dependent, and trusting—like a little child—to be great in the Kingdom. His words here apply directly to little children but may be properly extended to include “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40) and “the little ones” in the Kingdom. The kind of responsibilities that He points to here apply not only toward children but toward all of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

67. Jesus pronounced His “woe to the world for temptations to sin”—for that will be the universal experience of the world. But He pronounced a specific “woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!” We can’t hear that from Him without feeling His judgment of an individual’s bad behavior that may encourage bad behavior in others. If they cause us to sin, hands and feet are to be cut off and thrown away, and eyes are to be plucked out and thrown away. Extreme measures—and even if followed literally, they won’t eliminate the problem of temptation and sin. But Jesus surely is telling us to do whatever it takes to avoid willful sinning!

Responsibility for the spiritual welfare of others leads to a focus on the use of the key that binds sins and closes heaven to the unrepentant. We need to see this as the necessary concomitant of the Gospel if we are going to take the either/or nature of the Gospel seriously. (See Hebrews 10:26–31.) How could we possibly see a brother or sister committing spiritual suicide without reaching out to rescue him or her?

68. Personal admonition can be applied only to evident sins of commission or omission. It must never be a judgment of attitudes or motives or lack of faith. We cannot judge nor pointedly admonish what we cannot see.

69. Evident sins of commission: a man in the church leaves his wife and lives with another woman; a young church member lives sexually with another without being married; a man carelessly and habitually uses God’s name in vain; a woman is a habitual gossip about the faults of others. Evident sins of omission: persistent neglect of the fellowship of worship and communing; failing to contribute financially.

70. Only when the admonition is personal and private does loving concern for the erring person come across. Talking *about* instead of talking *to* changes personal concern that seeks the welfare of the erring into gossip at the expense of the erring. “If he listens to you” implies his acceptance of your admonition, his repentance, and his correction of the sinful situation. When that happens, you

have gained him again as your brother—to stand beside you and all Christians as repentant sinners who live under God’s grace in Christ.

71. Taking other members with you as witnesses to confirm your interaction with the one being admonished is based on Deuteronomy 19:15. If the matter finally must be taken to the church, the testimony of the witnesses will be a significant factor. In the life of a congregation, these witnesses would probably be elected elders of the congregation. The church has to be the congregation on the local scene, people who know the accused and the situation, people who care personally about the one who has been admonished.

72. Gentiles were not part of the people of God; tax collectors were Jews banned from the synagogue because their working for the Romans was seen as defection from the covenant faith. “Gentiles and tax collectors” had become a proverbial phrase to indicate one who was not part of the community of faith.

Excommunication, when properly carried out, is not “kicking someone out of the church” but is formal acknowledgment of the fact that a person, by his actions, has left the faith and the fellowship. Martin Franzmann says in *Follow Me*,

The “three steps” prescribed by Jesus are anything but legal prescription and casuistry. . . . These are merely the clear-cut expression of Jesus’ will for the fellowship of His disciples: the will, namely, that no sinner shall be needlessly degraded, that no sinner’s fate shall be committed to the subjectivity of any one man but shall be the concern of the collective love and sobriety of the whole church, that the new people of God shall remain a pure people of God, pure in virtue of the effective divine forgiveness at work in its midst. (pp. 153–54)

73. The agreement of the two must be based on the instruction of the Word regarding the will of God, and their prayer must be that the will of the Lord be done.

74. The source of power in any gathering of God’s people and their effective agreement in prayer is the presence of Jesus and their desire to implement His will in all of their considerations and actions.

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 33:7–9

75. Daniel’s use of “son of man” has messianic and eschatological significance. The Lord’s calling Ezekiel “son of man” emphasized his humanity as a finite creature called to represent the Infinite One. He was to faithfully bring the message he was given. Like all prophets, apostles, pastors, and teachers, he was in “sales,” not in “management.”

76. The principle enunciated is the responsibility of the spokesman to bring the assigned message without regard for its acceptance or rejection by those who hear it. A faithful watchman who sounds the alarm is not responsible for those who ignore it; an unfaithful watchman who does not sound the alarm is responsible for those who are lost because they were not warned by him. This surely is true and fair. Someone who has found the formula that would provide a total cure of all cancers but does not make it available to the world would be responsible for the deaths of those he might have saved, but that does not make him responsible for those who are offered the cure and reject it.

77. Christians have God’s total cure for sin and hell. Are we not responsible to God for proclaiming the Good News of Jesus and making the cure available to all? As Christians we are one another’s “keepers.” We must sound the alarm when someone’s relationship with Christ is being deadened by willful sin or persistent neglect!

78. Ezekiel was to be a faithful watchman, bringing warning to his people as appropriate—and Jesus said, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault.” We are not just to “mind our

own business” but in Jesus’ name to look to the true welfare of those around us. (See Philippians 2:1–4.)

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 13:1–10

79. Paul taught here that governmental authority is not just a sociological development, but is God’s determined will for humanity and, as such, is God’s representative. We are to look at properly constituted governing authorities as God’s representative for our good.

80. Generally it is true that the law-abiding need not fear the authorities, but there are always exceptions to this in which the innocent may suffer injustices. Under the modern concept of “government by the consent of the governed,” citizens act to remove oppressive, exploitative governments—by the ballot if possible, but by more forceful means if necessary. But Paul’s inspired counsel should make Christians hesitant to become quickly involved in civil disobedience or revolution—suffering wrong rather than doing wrong. “Those [authorities] that exist have been instituted by God” is definite, but so is “he is God’s servant for your good.” Governments may reach the point at which they are not God’s servants for good and must be opposed and replaced.

81. “The sword” is authority from God to be His agent in forcibly punishing the evildoer. The *machairan* was the short sword of a Roman soldier. Paul was beheaded with such a sword. Capital punishment, applied dispassionately for serious crimes such as murder, is surely included in the concept of “the sword.” When used justly in application of the law, “the sword” helps to maintain a peaceful society; when it is neglected or misused, society becomes unstable and lawless. The tendency in a society such as ours to see people as “essentially good” will frustrate and negate God’s will and purpose for governing authorities and bring all kinds of evils into the society.

82. “For the sake of conscience,” respect for God and His representatives motivates us to obey laws and support government—not just fear of the consequences of disobedience.

83. Clear commands of God in His Word always have priority over conflicting commands and laws of human authorities.

84. Agape love always consciously seeks the welfare of others. Paul mentions the various commandments to show that all of them fit under the umbrella of loving the neighbor, and thus agape love fulfills the great demands of the Law.

Lesson 6

Proper 19

O God, our refuge and strength, the author of all godliness, hear the devout prayers of Your Church, especially in times of persecution, and grant that what we ask in faith we may obtain; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 18:21–35

85. Peter’s question makes us recognize that we, too, tend to hold grudges and even want to retaliate instead of forgive. We naturally feel there are limits to what can be expected of us.

86. By multiplying Peter’s “seven,” Jesus insisted that we not limit or stop our forgiving. How many times? Only as many times as we want the heavenly Father’s forgiveness for ourselves. +

Franzmann says in *Follow Me*: “Jesus’ answer calls for unbounded forgiveness (18:22)—‘seventy times seven’ removes every limitation from forgiveness, just as ‘Love your enemies’ (5:44) removes every limitation from love” (p. 154).

87. Our human limitations and needs make it unrealistic to go on forgiving in a situation in which the offense is repeated again and again after only brief times of reform. Health and safety, emotional and physical, may require that you end such a situation by removing yourself. Today’s psychology recognizes that one who allows an abusive situation to continue, repressing anger and continually excusing or forgiving the offender, is a co-dependent and enabler who allows and nourishes the addiction or the aberrant behavior. Such a chain of trauma must be broken by removing yourself from direct contact and insisting that the hurtful behavior be corrected. This is not to be just punitive but therapeutic “tough love,” separating you from the situation and encouraging correction.

88. It is important for our own sake that we consciously forgive those who offend and hurt us and not let anger become resentment that will sour into hatred. (See 1 John 3:14–15; Hebrews 12:14–15.) Palestine has two major bodies of water. The Sea of Galilee receives the Jordan River from the north and sends it to the south and is fresh water, teeming with life. The Dead Sea receives the Jordan River and a few other streams but has no outlet. It loses water only by evaporation—and is clogged with salts and minerals. Nothing lives in it. The two seas provide a contrasting analogy regarding forgiving and not forgiving. Receive God’s forgiving love and extend it to others and you remain alive and healthy; receive God’s forgiving love and refuse to share it with others and you end up destroying any real life within you.

89. A forgiving spirit, in contrast to a hard, unforgiving spirit, enables the repentance of one who has hurt or offended you. It is the Good News of Jesus that enables us sinners to come to God again and again for forgiveness, and it develops the renewed mind in us that produces Christian attitudes and lifestyle. Similarly, our forgiving those who hurt us opens up the possibilities of change in them.

The parable's point is this: Forgive your brothers and sisters freely because God has forgiven you freely. There is warning as well as encouragement for us!

90. The unmerciful servant shows that even God's wondrous forgiveness is unappreciated by many who refuse to see how much they really need it and how loving and unstinting God is in His desire to forgive.

91. If we want to be the Sea of Galilee and not the Dead Sea in our Christian lives, we must forgive consciously in the name of Him who forgives us. Forgiving consciously means forgiving even when your sinful nature doesn't want to. Often that conscious forgiving needs to be consciously repeated again and again. But as this kind of forgiveness is practiced, we tend to get better at it.

92. We get power and grow in readiness to forgive as we conscientiously use Word and Sacrament, the Means of Grace, and put the Word into practice. The Holy Spirit works through these means to help us grow in appreciating God's forgiving love for us and enables a responsive love to be shown in our readiness to forgive our brothers and sisters.

The Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 50:15–21

While Joseph had forgiven them long before and had shown his love for them by caring for their needs, the brothers carried around a sense of guilt, and they knew that retribution was the natural rule in the society in which they lived.

93. The brothers added force to their plea by approaching Joseph in their father's name and by calling themselves "servants of the God of your father." Joseph had wept as he had tested his brothers when they first approached him to buy grain. He found they were no longer the insensitive men they had been earlier. Joseph wept now because he was caught up in the emotion of their fear and hesitancy. He assured them he would love them as his father's sons and as fellow servants of the Lord. While Joseph had ascended to a position of almost unlimited power in Egypt, he had not lost his perspective on life. He knew he could not stand in God's place by usurping what is God's prerogative. Romans 12:17–21 reminds us that like Joseph, we are not to avenge ourselves, but leave all such matters in God's hands—and not be disappointed and bitter when instead of punishing our enemies, He loves them and, in His mercy, turns them around in repentance. That God has had such mercy on us, so that His Son redeemed us and restores us, leads us to learn to imitate Him and repay evil with good.

94. Joseph saw God's hand in every circumstance of his life, directing it to accomplish God's own good purposes, and he was willing to "let go and let God." Paul's words in Romans 8:28–39 add irrefutable Christian logic to Joseph's example—and we are encouraged to trust God to be at work for good in everything in our lives. Whatever happens, such an outlook says, "God is at work in this. I will trust Him in anything."

95. Your group may point to instances in which God moved and directed and equipped them to be at the right place at the right time to provide the service that was needed. Plan to share something from your life; it will encourage openness.

96. Joseph's forgiveness toward his brothers exemplifies the kind of forgiveness Jesus urged with His parable. Joseph forgave out of his awareness of God's mercies toward him, and that is also the point Jesus made in His parable.

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 14:1–12

97. The striking thing about this whole consideration is that Paul identified those who clung to legalism as the ones who were "weak" in the faith. Usually it seems that those who have strong convictions about what is right and what is wrong in Christian behavior and about how the Church

ought to be doing things are the strongest Christians—and, as a result, they take strong stances in insisting that their views be the rule for the Church. But in the process, they sometimes get so hung up on doing the right thing in the right way at the right time that they equate that with being Christian—and their appreciation of justification by faith alone may be diminished by their legalism. The essence of being a Christian is “faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6). It is the person who understands this and conscientiously makes up his own mind about how he should express his faith and love in his life in the Body of Christ who really is a strong, mature Christian—and he should feel no need to force other Christians into his mold for expressing faith and love. Paul said, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:5).

98. Paul was mainly concerned that Christians love and respect one another and not judge one another harshly about matters that do not directly affect the faith.

99. Paul asserted the principle of Christian freedom to serve God according to one’s own informed conscience. (See Galatians 5:13–14.)

100. Both sides may indeed be “right” in things that are simply a matter of choice, in which no scriptural or moral right or wrong is involved. As Paul pointed out, the one who feels free to eat may do so in thankfulness, honoring the Lord, and the one who feels it is his duty to abstain may dedicate that act of willing self-denial to the Lord.

101. Paul expanded his argument to include living and dying to emphasize that the issues of life and death far transcend any arguments over legalistic details in matters that Scripture neither forbids nor commands. The Christian life is more than not eating meat—it is living out one’s faith in love. Dying as a Christian involves more than having observed certain days—it is approaching eternity trusting Christ for full redemption and the gift of eternal life.

102. Matters of scriptural indifference—matters simply of choice—are decided by majority vote in a congregation, and the minority goes along in love.

Lesson 7

Proper 20

Lord God, heavenly Father, since we cannot stand before You relying on anything we have done, help us trust in Your abiding grace and live according to Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 20:1–16

103. Jesus told His apostles that in His glorious kingdom, they would “sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28). Jesus expanded His assurances to “everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands” for His sake (v. 29a). They will “receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life” (v. 29b). Here, too, Jesus’ words go beyond the literal to include all who give the kingdom priority over every other association or attachment or possession. There surely is a present-life quality to His promise, for He adds “eternal life” as the ultimate gift, but the “hundredfold” is not a guarantee just of material reward. It reminds us of the vastly superior reward of knowing the blessing of Jesus’ presence in every aspect of life and His assurance that “all these things” we need will be ours as well.

104. With His parable, Jesus taught that life in the kingdom of God is based entirely on the gracious disposition and action of the King. No worker in His kingdom can approach Him and say, “I have worked for You, so now You owe me.” Instead, we are grateful to have been “hired” and are blessed by what He is disposed to give us, and we are to rejoice also in His grace toward others. Remember, Jesus said even a cup of cold water given in His name will be rewarded. A comparable situation in the Church today would be comparing a lifelong Christian who served his Lord faithfully with one who came to Christ only in his later years, yet both receive the same assurance of eternal life as God’s gift of grace!

105. The landowner’s “Do you begrudge my generosity?” makes us recognize that we easily slip from a grace application to a works emphasis as we make comparisons. We know we are saved by grace, but when we make comparisons, we find ourselves sometimes thinking we who have served conscientiously deserve God’s grace more than the newcomer or those who don’t appear to work as hard in their service as we do. In the course of this discussion, ask your group, “What figure in another of Jesus’ parables is brought to mind by these complainers?” The older brother who resented the father’s welcome and acceptance of his prodigal brother is the classic example of the “works-oriented” who don’t want God to act in grace toward others.

106. Jesus’ *mashal* reminds us that God does things differently in His kingdom than we would expect. Where the one who would be greatest must be the slave of all, where there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine lifelong church members who “need no repentance” (Luke 15:7), it is not surprising that the last to come, perhaps because they had the

farthest to travel in their spiritual journey, should be first in line in approaching the throne of grace with their praise.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 55:6–9

Fill-in Answers: Isaiah’s “seek the Lord” and “call upon Him”—both imperatives—call for decisive spiritual action on the part of people who were busily adapting themselves to life in Babylon and forgetting their covenant identity.

Isaiah called the exiles to active remembering of the covenant, to active practicing of those things that strengthened the covenant faith.

107. “While He may be found” and “while He is near” assure us that He may be found and that He is near, but they also suggest that times of opportunity do come to an end. Returning to the Lord (repenting), the wicked forsaking His way and the unrighteous man His thoughts, are always necessary parts of seeking and finding the Lord. (See Matthew 3:1–2; 4:17; Acts 2:37–38.) Unless the Church’s message includes a call to repentance, we may be “comforting the comfortable” with a Gospel of cheap grace instead of “afflicting the comfortable” with God’s call to decisively turn to Him in repentance. Isaiah encouraged and enabled this turnaround by assuring that the Lord will have compassion and will abundantly pardon those who turn to Him. This assurance is still the dynamic that allows “the afflicted to be comforted” as they turn from sin to Christ.

108. To be assured that God’s ways and thoughts were infinitely higher than theirs encouraged the exiles to see that God was at work even in their difficult circumstances and would live up to His covenant promise—even though they could not understand the way He was going about it. That is true also for us when we experience difficult times of testing. We trust God’s higher wisdom and knowledge and purpose.

109. Some in your group may be willing to tell of times and circumstances in which God was especially near and accessible to them. Sharing your own experience will encourage them to be open with one another.

110. God’s coming to us in Christ to fulfill His covenant of grace assures us that He wants nothing more than to be accessible to us, ready always to communicate His grace to us through Word and Sacrament and ready always to hear the prayers we bring in Jesus’ name. (See Romans 5:1–2; 8:38–39.)

111. The landowner’s approach to his hired workers was not what they expected. God’s grace is always surprising because His thoughts and ways are infinitely higher than ours.

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 1:12–14, 19–30

Fill-in Answers: Paul told them that his house arrest had actually served to advance the Gospel, and that the whole palace guard had come to know that his imprisonment was for Christ.

112. Because Paul was being bold to testify even to his guards while under house arrest, most of the brothers in the Lord were being encouraged to speak the Word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

113. The Philippians contributed their prayers for Paul. That and their need for Paul’s continued guidance encouraged him to think it would be God’s will for him to supply their need: “To remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.” Paul’s main concern for himself was that he not “be at all ashamed”—not back away from his proclamation of the Gospel when put on trial in Caesar’s court—but that “with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.”

114. Paul's attitude toward life as a disciple of Jesus is the epitome of the Christian's attitude toward all of life. To live with this attitude and purpose is "Christ"—relating to Him in faith and serving Him faithfully in love. As we approach it in faith, to die is "gain," the whole purpose of Christ for us and in us being fully realized when we pass through the door of death into eternal life. Ask yourself and your group: "Can you describe your daily life as 'Christ'? Can you sincerely say, trusting your Lord's promises, 'Death will be gain for me?'" Paul was convinced that God would lead him safely through what lay ahead so that he could "continue with [the Philippians and others] for your progress and joy in the faith."

115. Paul was so secure in knowing the Philippian Christians' love for him that he could say: "I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again." After a conversation, as he was leaving, old Gus Gagelman, a farmer and a member of Trinity Lutheran Church in Great Bend, Kansas, used to say with a twinkle in his eye, "Sure glad you got to see me!" And he was right! People did love him and were always happy to see him! That's how Paul felt—"When I come, your joy will overflow!"

116. Paul applied his situation to the Philippian Christians and urged them to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel. The abiding values are the key factors in conduct that is worthy of the Gospel of Christ. Such a life is based on faith; it displays a living hope; and it expresses itself in love. Ephesians 4:25–5:21 gives an excellent detailed description of such Christian life and conduct.

117. The faithful, fearless witness of Christians even to the point of death would be "a clear sign to [their oppressors] of their destruction." Their fellow Christians—and they themselves—would see in their faithful, fearless witness a sign "of your salvation, and that from God." Most martyrdoms today are the result of persecution by religious zealots—Muslim, Hindu, and so on—so it's hard to say that they will be a sign of their oppressors' destruction. Muslims especially think they are serving Allah when they take action against and execute "infidels." They, too, are willing to die for their beliefs. But when the deaths of Christian martyrs do not deter the continued faithfulness of living Christians, the fanatics must have to think: "What is it about this relationship with Jesus that makes them so stubborn?" The death of martyrs, who witness even to death, surely is a sign that they and all who put their trust in Jesus will be saved.

118. The Christian worldview is that our lives in this world are important as we live as God's children and seek first the kingdom of our Lord Jesus. In the process, we are given opportunities to grow in our relationship with Him and to further the outreach and impact of the Kingdom. We need to make the most of these opportunities. All the while, we may know in faith and hope that for us to live is Christ and that to die in faith in Him is gain. So, while we are at work here, we recognize that our citizenship is in heaven, and we live looking up, waiting for our Lord Jesus to come in glory—or waiting for Him to take our spirits to be with Him until that Last Day.

Lesson 8

Proper 21

*Almighty God, You exalted Your Son to the place of all honor and authority.
Enlighten our minds by Your Holy Spirit that, confessing
Jesus as Lord, we may be led into all truth; through the same Jesus
Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.*

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 21:23–32

119. The point of the parable is that good intentions and right words are not sufficient in themselves. They must be accompanied by obedient actions.

120. The way of righteousness that John pointed to involved a sincere turning to God in repentance and faith and called for a change in behavior consistent with that faith. The tax collectors and the prostitutes had said no to God and disdained His way, but they turned to God in repentance as they heard His call through John. The religious leaders were always saying their outward yes to God in their formalistic religion, but they did not respond to John’s message and give their hearts to God in sincere repentance. This parable says to us that we should not be content with being just “believers” who say the right words and go through the proper religious forms, but should back up our believing with a discipleship that displays in action that we are sincere about our relationship with Christ. It also reminds us that we may be surprised and become resentful when people who have been living sinful lives apart from God and the Church are struck by the Word and turn to God in sincere repentance—and are fully accepted on that basis.

121. We often find it easier to deal with the negatives in our lives, the sins of commission, and bring our behavior under control, than to put the positives of Christian love and service beyond good intentions into appropriate actions. Sins of omission are easily overlooked because “we didn’t do anything wrong.” God’s Holy Spirit, asserting Himself through the Gospel of Jesus, is required both for bringing our negative behavior under God’s control and for warming our hearts to glorify God through acts of Christian service. Only He can turn us from negatives and move us into positives of a responsive love and service that puts good intentions into action. We are easily content to be just believers and not disciples.

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32

122. The exiles in Babylon were surrounded by pagan influences. Jerusalem and the temple were in ruins. Their remembrance of and allegiance to the covenant were badly strained. And they were blaming it all on the faithlessness of their fathers. In effect, they were saying, “We can’t be anything but what we are because they brought these circumstances on us!” Through Ezekiel, the Lord countered with the principle of individual responsibility before the Lord. The Lord spelled out

the principle of individual responsibility very clearly and made it as weighty as possible by taking an oath on Himself: “As I live,” He said.

123. The principle takes away all excuses for negative behavior, but it also sets forth the opportunity that each person has to rise above the circumstances he has been given.

124. The attitude of the exiles in saying “The way of the Lord is not just” has been repeated many times when people wonder “Why do I have to suffer just because they . . . ” or “If God is loving, why does He allow them to bring so much suffering into our world?” Such attitudes are an attempt to evade personal responsibility, but the principle of individual responsibility asserts that we are responsible, if not for the circumstances, then for the way we react to and behave in the circumstances.

125. Through Ezekiel, the Lord told the exiles that they were to blame neither the past actions of their fathers and grandfathers nor the Lord Himself for their spiritual malaise. The solution for them was to turn to the Lord in repentance and to receive the new heart and spirit He was eager to give them. The *Concordia Self-Study Bible*: “What had been promised unconditionally (11:19; 36:26) is here portrayed as attainable but not inevitable” (p. 1253).

126. That God has “no pleasure in the death of anyone” shows His essential nature as the Life-Giver. God is holy and just and will not coexist forever with evil, but His desire for His creatures is life, not death. His mercy in Christ is His greatest glory, and He wants nothing more than for us to respond to it willingly. He lets people reject Christ and choose death, but He takes no pleasure in it.

127. This lesson emphasizes that we carry personal responsibility before God for our response to Him and its expression in our lives. We cannot blame others, and we surely cannot blame God. It ties in with the Gospel’s warning against saying yes but not living the yes, and its assurance that God is always ready to have us change a no to a yes.

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 2:1–18

128. The basis of the “ifs” is the Gospel of Jesus. If we have encouragement in Christ, if we have comfort from love, if we have participation in the Spirit, if we have affection and sympathy, then we are to be of the same mind, then we are to have the same love, then we are to be in full accord and of one mind, then we are to do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than ourselves. These phrases describe the sanctified Christian fellowship that is built on the Gospel.

129. Other congregations to whom Paul wrote, like the Corinthian Christians, were divided over various issues. He wanted his dear friends in Philippi to avoid that trauma. When church members act out of rivalry and conceit, the fellowship is put into turmoil; members are reduced to arguing their positions and desires and separating from one another instead of working together toward Gospel goals.

130. In humility you consciously avoid unrealistic assessments of personal gifts or strengths as compared to others. Humble people look beyond themselves for opportunities to serve others and consider it only proper that the service be given. The opposite of looking “to the interests of others” might be “I’d better mind my own business”; “I don’t have time or energy to get involved”; “they made their bed; they’ll just have to lie in it”; and “surely others will be able to help them.” We are to imitate our Lord Jesus Christ both in attitude and in actions.

131. Paul made it clear from the outset that Christ Jesus is in very nature God—“God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made; of one substance with the Father,” as the Nicene Creed puts it.

132. To carry out the saving will of God, the eternal Word willingly “put His crown on the shelf” and lived as one of us. His obedient service as Representative Man took Him all the way to dying for our sins, “even death on a cross.” Jesus, the God-man, was exalted to the highest place

precisely because He had obediently and successfully carried out the saving mission. It is significant that the Christ did not go back to being the fleshless eternal Word. His identification with us as our brother in the flesh was not temporary; it continues even now. It is *Jesus* (His name as a man, meaning “Yahweh saves” or “Savior”) that is now the name above every name. All of the other names by which God revealed Himself teach us something about God, but now it is the name *Jesus* that is the vital name, without which we really don’t know God and can’t live with Him. (See John 1:18; 1 John 2:22–23.) On Judgment Day, every tongue will confess “Jesus Christ is Lord.” Those who knew Him and trusted Him and followed Him in their lifetimes will find that to be the high point of their resurrection experience. Those who rejected Him or neglected Him will do so begrudgingly, but they will do it. Every tongue will make this confession to the glory of God the Father!

133. We will grow in a humble, serving attitude as our determined discipleship is continually nourished by the remembrance of Jesus’ loving servanthood and the realization that He did it for us! It is our continued involvement with Him through the Means of Grace that enables us to imitate Him in willing humility and service. Then, exercising our discipleship in appropriate service that shows love for Christ and for others is its own reward. (See 1 John 4:7–21.)

134. The Greek verb is in present tense, indicating continuing action, “keep on working.” There is always an ongoing emphasis in the requirement to “keep on seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.”

135. Grumbling about what we are expected to be and do as disciples of Jesus will rob us of the joy that comes to those who serve willingly and happily dedicate their service to the One who served them first. Questioning that argues with the Lord about what He has called us to do will generally lead us to simply avoid opportunities for service that He gives us, perhaps telling ourselves, “That kind of service is not right for me. I’ll let others do it.” When we develop an attitude of grumbling and questioning, we surely will not be perceived as “lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life.”

Lesson 9

Proper 22

Gracious God, You gave Your Son into the hands of sinful men who killed Him. Forgive us when we reject Your unfailing love, and grant us the fullness of Your salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 21:33–46

Most parables are not allegories and should not be interpreted in an allegorical manner. They generally have one point to get across, so you should not force every aspect of the story to have a symbolical meaning. In this parable, however, all of the principals in the story represent historical figures, and their actions relate to historical happenings. Isaiah's imagery in today's Old Testament Lesson pictures Israel as the vineyard that disappointed the Lord. Jesus' parable revolves around the tenants of the vineyard and their dishonest and abusive interaction with the landowner and his representatives.

136. The tenants were the religious leaders who were given responsibility for caring for Israel. It is they, not the vineyard (Israel) itself, who are the focus of judgment.

137. The landowner, of course, is the Lord Himself, who sent His prophets to guide and correct Israel's leaders and who was in the very act of sending His own Son to get His fruit. The parable was saying the rejection of the Son by Israel's leaders truly was rejection of the Lord Yahweh Himself.

138. Jesus quoted from Scripture to give His words God's own impact. He had harsh words for them as He applied their own judgment against them. He told them bluntly, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit." He wanted the Scripture itself to speak to them and to validate that what He said was true.

139. The leaders' rejection of the "stone" that God chose to be the Cornerstone of His building is similar in effect to their rejection of the "servants" and the "son" whom the "owner" had sent to get his due from the "tenants." Jesus' talking about the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone surely forced the leaders to recognize that He was claiming to be the "son" of the parable as well as the surprising Cornerstone. The ones receiving the Kingdom are all from any and all peoples who accept Jesus as God's Cornerstone, put their faith in Him, and are built into God's temple of living stones. "One who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces" refers to people who stumble at the Gospel and as a result miss out on real life. "When it falls on anyone, it will crush him" refers to the judgment the unbeliever and rejecter of the Gospel will bring upon themselves.

140. Jesus told the parable as a warning to make these self-willed men recognize what they were doing in rejecting Him and plotting to do away with Him. He surely desired that they turn from their willfulness to become the kind of "tenants" the "landowner" wanted them to be, but He knew this would not be the case. God's Word, also the Gospel of Jesus, often falls on deaf ears and does not penetrate stubborn hearts, but then its very proclamation becomes God's judgment against

those who reject it. (See Isaiah 6:8–13; 2 Corinthians 2:14–17.) The effect of Jesus’ parable on the religious leaders was that “they were seeking [for a way] to arrest Him.” As we consider this parable, we cannot content ourselves with just understanding its implications for the Jewish leaders and people in their rejection of the Son of God. We are the “vineyard” today, and our spiritual leaders are the Lord’s “tenants.” We are to be good stewards of the Gospel, aligning the Church with the Cornerstone, building on the foundation of His person and His saving work, and producing fruit to His glory.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 5:1–7

141. “He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it” speaks of the long-term commitment of the Lord to Israel as His vineyard. The picture describes not a temporary effort on the Lord’s part but a continuing investment intended to cultivate full productivity over a long period of time.

142. It was only appropriate that the Lord expect a good crop of “grapes” after all His loving investment in His covenant people. In all sincerity He could say, “What more was there to do for My vineyard, that I have not done in it?” He had chosen them to be His own, had rescued them from slavery, had cared for them in the wilderness wanderings, had fought for them in the conquest of Canaan, had established them in their own homeland, and had provided the ceremonial law as a continual reminder of His covenant of grace and blessing. They surely should have been demonstrating their love for Him in their service in word and deed.

Because they produced only “wild grapes,” they were to become like a wasteland instead of a cultured vineyard that has been pruned and hoed. Briars and thorns would grow up and drought conditions would prevail. The comparison to Moses’ words about curses for disobedience is significant.

143. Again and again the Bible teaches us that when God looks for response to His love, He looks to how we are treating one another and helping others in their needs. The people of Jerusalem were “religious.” They were seeing to it that the temple rituals were faithfully carried out and were counting on this to assure their continued security under the Lord’s care. But they were honoring the Lord with their lips while their hearts were far from Him. Injustices and inequities were rampant in their society; the rich were getting richer at the expense of the poor. And all the while they were being “religious” in the temple. It has to be clear to us that God will not accept a veneer of religiosity. He calls for social justice and helpfulness. (See Isaiah 1.) Jesus, too, made it clear that doing the will of God is the necessary concomitant of speaking His name in faith and love. (See Matthew 7:21–27.) If we say “Lord, I love you,” He always asks, “How are you showing this in your interaction with fellow Christians and in helping the poor and needy of the world?”

144. Most scholars point to this song of the vineyard as the Scripture base for Jesus’ parable of the tenants. The thrust is different, though: Isaiah’s picture is focused on Israel herself; Jesus’ words in the Holy Gospel focus on the religious leaders.

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 3:4b–14

Fill-in Answer: In today’s Epistle, Paul declared that he was born of orthodox parents, who circumcised him on the eighth day, was of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a zealous Pharisee, obedient to the Jewish laws, faultless as far as legalistic righteousness. He said, “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.”

145. Philippi, a colony and extension of Rome, evidently didn’t have ten Jewish families living there, for when Paul came to Philippi, he found no synagogue, but contacted a small group of

Jewish women and Lydia, a Gentile proselyte, at their meeting spot on the riverbank. But the Gentiles of Philippi knew about the Jews—how proud they were at retaining their Jewish identity and the observance of the ceremonial laws of Judaism. The Jews made it a point to be different from the Gentiles and in many subtle ways, let the Gentiles know that “different” meant “better.” So Paul was letting them know that he even had more to brag about than the average Jew. All of this was intended to make the change that Jesus had caused in him all the more dramatic to his Gentile readers. Judaizers were approaching these new Christians with the suggestion that if they wanted to be real Christians, they should become “Jewish” Christians, but Paul strongly defended their freedom from the ceremonial law.

146. Paul’s goal was to “gain Christ and be found in Him,” enjoying the perfect righteousness that Christ won for us and which He alone can give. This righteousness is always a gift of God’s grace, given with no strings attached and with nothing held back. (See Romans 3:21–28.)

147. Paul knew that the righteousness he had attained through dedication to the Law and zealous defense of the traditions of the Jews was always imperfect—both in performance and in motivation. It’s true for all of us: the more serious you are about the Law and about your attempts to keep it, the more it reveals your failures. That’s why Paul now saw as “rubbish” all that he had previously valued. He eagerly embraced his liberation and assurance of salvation in Christ.

148. When we apply Paul’s phrases to our faith and life, we come up with something like this: “I have suffered the loss of all things . . . that I may know [Christ]”—Jesus has come to us, as He did to Paul, to convince us that He is indeed God’s Christ. Like Paul, we want that awareness to permeate all of life. “The power of His resurrection”—The risen Jesus confronted Paul and has called us to faith. With Paul, we find there is victory over sin and death only in relationship with the living Lord Jesus. “Share His sufferings”—Paul’s representing Jesus as His apostle brought suffering into his experience and underscored the fact that he was representing Jesus. When we carry our crosses and meet opposition and animosity, we are experiencing the same. (See John 15:18–25; 2 Corinthians 11:23–27.) “Like Him in His death”—Jesus died praying, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!” (Luke 23:46). In similar faith, with Paul we say, “To live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). “Attain the resurrection from the dead”—With Paul we look to the goal of eternal life: “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:56–57).

149. A runner can’t be looking at distractions or be content with what has already happened in a race; he needs to focus on the finish line and continue to expend maximum effort to get there. We can’t let all kinds of baggage from our past weigh us down or distract us—neither our own failures nor our having been hurt by others. The past is covered by the grace of God. It is the present and the future that hold both challenge and opportunity to us, which we can meet in assurance of God’s continued love.

150. Note the active and the passive in these statements by Paul. He actively pressed on to take hold of the goal—all the while knowing that he had been called and taken hold of by God in Christ. There is great comfort in our adopting Paul’s attitude toward the Christian life. God has chosen us in His gracious love. He won’t change His mind about us. The challenge is found in our doing our best to live up to the privilege of being His chosen ones, who are to bring forth fruit to the Father’s glory. Paul was saying, “Hold true to what you have already obtained by God’s grace in Christ.”

Lesson 10

Proper 23

Almighty God, You invite us to trust in You for our salvation. Deal with us not in the severity of Your judgment but by the greatness of Your mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 22:1–14

151. With this parable, Jesus wanted to make the people and their leaders aware that they were too content with the status quo, too preoccupied with personal affairs, and too stubborn in wanting to continue a system that exalted them to hear and respond to the Good News of the Kingdom that John proclaimed and Jesus personified. They were not ready to be involved in the inner, personal change that God’s invitation required. That “the king” sent out repeated invitations to his chosen people shows the love he had for them and his desire for their positive response to his love. Rejection of the invitation is always serious. In the parable, Jesus says the king “sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.” Jerusalem’s destruction by the Roman army in AD 70 was a striking fulfillment of this and brought the Old Testament’s temple ritual worship to an end.

152. The command to go out to the streets and “invite to the wedding feast as many as you find” and the servants’ bringing in “both bad and good” emphasize both the universality of the Gospel invitation and its gracious nature. We may distinguish between reputable and disreputable people, but before God, all are equally guilty and all are equally eligible for His grace in Christ. “Evident sinners,” when they turn to Christ in sincere repentance and faith, are welcomed to the banquet hall just as “solid citizens,” when they turn to Christ in repentance and faith. “Those invited were not worthy” has to be understood in terms of their rejection of the invitation, for none deserve to come. *Axios*, translated “worthy,” carried the idea of “equal value” or “equal weight.” Those who reject Christ are not worthy, not because of their sins, but because they have rejected the One who removes sins and graciously makes us “equal to” feasting with Him. The welcoming of the Gentiles into God’s kingdom surprised the Jewish Christians, who had a hard time getting over the feeling that they were special to God just because they were Abraham’s descendants. In our pride, we, too, may have problems with God’s love for “undesirable” people. The parable warns everyone, including us, not to miss the opportunity to celebrate with Christ at the wedding feast because of a self-exalting pride that negates the Gospel.

153. The wedding garment is the righteousness won for us by Jesus. When we have been so garmented by grace through faith, God sees us only through the filter of His forgiving love in Christ. (See Romans 3:21–28; 8:1–4; Philippians 3:7–11.) Those who reject this garment invite God to see them as they are and to judge them on the basis of their own performance. (See Isaiah 64:6; Romans 3:19–20; John 3:36.) Since this offer of grace in Christ is open and available to all, there is no excuse for those who prefer to “do it themselves.” When people hear and understand the Gospel’s

invitation but ignore it or reject it, all their excuses are gone, and their responsibility before God is increased. (See Luke 12:47–48.)

154. The Greek verbs in Jesus' *mashal* are weightier than our "called" and "chosen." *Kletoi* means "called ones," signifying all those who are confronted with God's gracious, effective call in Christ to eternal life, whether or not they accept it. *Eklektoi* means "elected ones," signifying those who have been in God's mind from eternity, have been elected in Christ, and do not reject the call as it comes through the Gospel. Many people choose not to be the elect through their disinterest, preoccupation with earthly affairs (vv. 3–5), or desire to wear their own works garments instead of the grace garment that God provides (v. 11).

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 25:6–9

155. "On this mountain" refers back to the concluding verses of chapter 24, where the Lord is described as reigning on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem. In eschatological terms, we see this as a reference to the new Jerusalem, the eternal kingdom of our Lord. It is especially striking and emphasizes the eschatological thrust of this pericope that the feast of rich food will be prepared for all peoples. The prophecy of hope is not just for the people of Judah, but will find its ultimate fulfillment when the Good News of salvation in Jesus is proclaimed to all nations.

156. The covering that is cast over all peoples and the veil that is spread over all nations are illustrative of death. None can escape its reach. Death was sometimes called "the Great Swallower." Here the Lord is described as the one who will swallow up death forever, and He will do it "on this mountain." This refers ultimately to eternal life in the new Jerusalem. (See 1 Corinthians 15:54–57.) But it is especially striking that it was also geographically true that the One who won the victory for all peoples and nations gave up His life and rose again "on this mountain" outside the gates of Jerusalem.

157. John repeated Isaiah's picture as he was given a view of its fulfillment in his vision in Revelation. The promise that tears and death, mourning and crying, and pain will be overcome and removed once for all belongs to all who will receive God's gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus, the promised Messiah.

158. "The LORD has spoken" is like a great "Amen" at the end of the statement. When we say "Amen," we are saying "Yes, that certainly is true!" As the prophet brought this great eschatological assurance, his "Amen" was "The LORD [not Isaiah] has spoken." Preachers need to be able to say "The LORD has spoken" when they have finished a sermon because they know they have proclaimed His Word.

159. The obvious tie to today's Holy Gospel is the picture of the feast provided by the Lord for all peoples. It corresponds to the wedding banquet in which those who by faith have received Christ's "robe of righteousness" covering their sin may attend (Galatians 3:27).

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 4:4–13

160. Rejoicing in the Lord means letting His love and peace pervade and transform every circumstance of life. Uplook changes outlook! Paul exemplified such rejoicing in the Lord, a rejoicing that is not dependent on happy circumstances. Christ's love was sustaining and cheering Paul, bringing light into his dark circumstances.

161. In the eternal kingdom, we will experience fullness of joy in Jesus' presence. He is coming soon! Living in anticipation of His coming, we recognize that what we have or don't have here is rather inconsequential. Yielding our rights may be inconvenient and irritating here, but in view of what awaits us in heaven, it doesn't really matter.

162. Paul prescribes confident prayer as the remedy for anxiety. As we turn matters over to God, we are able to rejoice in the assurance that He has things well in hand for us. (See 1 Peter 5:5–7.) Joyful thanksgiving must always be an ingredient in our prayers—not just because we have enough things and everything is going well, but because we have Jesus and that makes everything right. Giving thanks is an exercise that influences our whole perspective: we focus on blessings received in Christ instead of on circumstances that trouble and threaten us.

163. The result of building our lives on thanksgiving is that we are continually focused on the fact that God is at work in everything for our good, so the result is that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” The peace that God offers is the assurance that we have in Christ that nothing in all creation can separate us from His love. (See Romans 8:31–39.) It doesn’t seem that way at times when we take a logical view of things, but if we go beyond understanding to faith and trust that is based solely on the surprising Gospel of Christ, we find that the Spirit builds this surpassing peace of God in our hearts and lives.

164. An honest look at ourselves leads us to recognize that our sinful nature is still active and loves to respond to temptation. We may “put [it] to death” (Colossians 3:5), but it revives when we are not looking. Awareness of this drives us to the Gospel—happy that we are saved not because we have repented and become good people, but because in Christ we have full, free, and continuing forgiveness. This encourages us to live in the Spirit of Jesus, focus on positive values, and, through Word and prayer and worship in the fellowship of the Church, claim the victory over what the world communicates.

Fill-in Answers: Paul thanked the Philippians that they had found the opportunity to renew their concern for him.

165. The secret of contentment in whatever situation is to focus on what we have in the grace of God, a living relationship with Christ and assurance that also our material circumstances are under the purview of His loving providence.

Lesson 11

Proper 24

O God, the protector of all who trust in You, have mercy on us that with You as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not the things eternal; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 22:15–22

166. Evidently, a good deal of planning went into the Pharisees' approach to Jesus. They perhaps thought of Jesus as a revolutionary, so they brought the Herodians to verify His "attack" on Rome if He were to answer, "No, it is not lawful (religiously proper) for Jews to pay taxes to Caesar." Should He answer "Yes, it is lawful and proper," they felt He would lose some of His standing with the people, who resented the poll tax levied on every individual under the direct rule of Rome. The Pharisees felt they couldn't lose either way.

167. The Pharisees approached Jesus in a very effusive manner, no doubt thinking they would thus "disarm" Him and lead Him to give the straight, strong answer that would get Him into trouble, because He would want to live up to the image of one who did not "care about anyone's opinion" and was not "swayed by appearances."

With divine wisdom, Jesus' statement spoke to both sides of the issue and to both of the groups who confronted Him. His "render to Caesar" spoke to those who resented and resisted human authority (including the Pharisees), and His "render . . . to God" spoke to those who looked no further than human authority (like the Herodians).

168. Luther called the Church "God's right hand" and government "God's left hand." They are exclusive of each other in their areas of concern and in the way they go about fulfilling their purpose in God's plan for humanity. Government is concerned with regulating society so that it is stable and secure and peaceful. Government uses the law and its enforcement as the means to achieve its end. The Church, the kingdom of God, is concerned with renewing the hearts and lives of people in relation to God and uses the Word of God, its Law and Gospel, to bring this to effect. The government has to be content with forcing outward behavior; the Church concerns itself also with inner motives and attitudes. These two kingdoms are so exclusive of each other in this sense that it produces only problems and defeats their purposes when the two hands are confused—when the Church tries to force people to be "Christian" and when the government deals with lawbreakers primarily in love and forgiveness. For Christians, the two kingdoms are inclusive because we see God and His will in both. Rendering to God what is God's includes rendering to Caesar what is properly His.

169. We are to "render to Caesar" conscientious respect for and submission to authority; right behavior; payment of taxes to support government; civic service as we have opportunity. The Bible references say "render . . . to God" means we owe Him worship and praise; belief in His Son; public

confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior; cheerful Christian giving; spreading the Good News to the nations; and meeting Jesus and serving Him by serving the world's needy.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 45:1–7

While the prophets generally were “forthtellers,” when the Word of the Lord came to them in the power of the Spirit, they surely could become “foretellers.” The great messianic prophecies of Isaiah and others, which included some very specific details, are a case in point. In his writings, Isaiah made much of the Lord’s ability to foretell the future as a quality that distinguished Him from false gods. (See 44:6–8.)

170. This pericope clearly states that it is Yahweh who guided the course of history so Cyrus would unwittingly be His “anointed” to restore the remnant of Judah. Similarly, at the time of the birth of Jesus, Caesar Augustus became God’s instrument to see to it, by his ordering a census, that God’s Son was born in Bethlehem, as prophesied, and not in Nazareth.

171. Cyrus did acknowledge Yahweh in not only giving permission for the Jews to return to Judea but also in supporting their efforts to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple in the face of objections and opposition.

172. Yahweh’s ultimate purpose in guiding destinies is so “that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides Me.” That is always His goal. Theologians distinguish between God’s causative will and His permissive will. In His causative will, He *makes* things happen (creation and sustaining the universe; sending Jesus as Savior); in His permissive will, He *allows* things to happen (human sin and rebellion; a resultant world “out of sync” in which accidents, illness, natural calamities, and man’s inhumanity to man bring suffering to people). James says that God is not the cause of evil. (See James 1:13.) But God does allow evil—“I create darkness . . . and create calamity”—in that sense and works in and through it for the benefit of His people, as He was doing for the Jews in exile. (See Romans 8:28.)

173. We can work at gaining a perspective on life that looks beyond the natural cause-and-effect world to see God’s hand in everything. Our use of His Word and turning to Him in prayer and thanksgiving bring the Spirit’s dynamic into this.

174. God’s use of Cyrus as His instrument to help His people ties in with Jesus’ acknowledging Caesar as the governing authority of His day. The Roman Empire itself was God’s instrument to provide “the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4) with its *Pax Romana*, its international intercourse, its use of an international language, and its system of roads.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

175. Paul’s personal concern comes across in his “We give thanks to God always for all of you” and his assurance that he mentioned them (a suggestion that he named names as he prayed) before God for their strong Christian qualities. The Thessalonian Christians had been able to work and labor and endure because they had been blessed with the three great, abiding qualities: faith, hope, and love.

176. The work (*ergou*, the same word used by James in his “faith apart from works is dead” [2:26]) produced by faith is confessing Christ publicly, living around the Word and Sacrament in the Christian fellowship, promoting outreach with the Gospel, and meeting Jesus in “the least of these” with love and service in His name. The labor (*korou*, labor that produces fatigue, even exhaustion) prompted by agape love is extending forgiveness in Jesus’ name and, in the Spirit’s power, seeking the welfare even of those who are hurting you, those hard to love. Paul knew that the Thessalonian Christians were giving Christlike love and forgiveness to the Jews who were harassing and

persecuting them. Hope inspires steadfastness because it contrasts the temporary suffering with the eternal glory in Christ. (See Romans 8:18, 31–39.)

177. The joyous response to the Gospel of Christ on the part of the Thessalonian Christians and their continued dedication to their new faith and life in the face of persecution convinced Paul that they were among God’s chosen ones. The Spirit’s presence in the apostles had been evidenced with tongues of fire and the ability to speak unknown languages. This gift of tongues as a manifestation of the Spirit continued to be experienced by some of those who were introduced to Jesus by Paul. Perhaps this was the case in Thessalonica, though Paul does not name this gift. Their evident faith, love, and hope—demonstrated in work and labor and steadfastness—were evidence enough. To be told you are chosen by God is a humbling thing, for you know that the choosing was entirely an act of God’s grace. But it is also wonderfully assuring and strengthening to know that God’s love in Christ destined you to be His own and reached out to you to bring that to effect.

178. Paul was able to say, “You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.” His dedication to the Gospel and his determination to provide it freely to believers led Paul always to support himself with his trade, making tents and sails. He did not expect or accept money from those he served as Jesus’ apostle. (See 1 Corinthians 9:1–18.) His dedication to God and to them as recipients of the Gospel must have led him to evident rejoicing, even though he was the object of the fury of the Jews. As he practiced what he preached, he became a strong model for them to imitate. (See Acts 16:16–25.)

179. Encourage this kind of sharing by being ready to point to someone who was your own model of Christian living.

180. Discuss various possibilities based on the text. In this whole consideration, it is important to remember that outward lifestyle reflects inward faith, which is given by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. We represent Jesus and encourage others to believe and follow Jesus by what they see in us as much as by what they hear from us, but we must remember that the Spirit does give us opportunities also to speak the Gospel of Jesus in all of these settings. The Christian lifestyle is said to provide the “music” that attracts attention and leads to relationship, opening up opportunity also to share the “lyrics.”

181. This question is helpful mainly as a springboard into some analysis of your congregation by your group. Does your congregation have a reputation for any of these areas?

- strong preaching and spirited worship
- eagerness to study the Word together
- warm fellowship
- a well-organized approach to your ministry together
- generous giving for your local program and for the mission elsewhere
- personal concern for the needy in the congregation and the community
- a friendly, inclusive welcome to newcomers

After thinking through all of them, ask yourselves what you most need to work at to improve.

Lesson 12

Reformation Day

Almighty and gracious Lord, pour out Your Holy Spirit on Your faithful people. Keep us steadfast in Your grace and truth, protect and deliver us in times of temptation, defend us against all enemies, and grant to Your Church Your saving peace; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 8:31–36

Fill-in Answers: They were to abide in His Word. Then they would know the truth, and it would set them free.

182. Abiding in the Word of Jesus involves us in regular hearing of the Word together with fellow Christians as it is read in our worship services, reading the Word devotionally by ourselves, studying the Word together with other Christians or by ourselves, and putting what the Word leads us to—firm faith and obedient discipleship—into practice in our lives. Growth in faith and life is the goal, and that requires continual, diligent effort.

183. The growing realization of the truth will bring us to appreciation and expression of a growing freedom in Christ. In Christ we are free from guilt, the consequences of our sin; we are free from the basic sin of wanting to go our own way instead of God’s way; we are free from fear of what men may do to us and free from fear of death itself, for we share Christ’s victory; we are free from bondage under the threat of Law-based religion to enjoy all the assurances of the Gospel; we are free from the deadening frustration of a works-righteous “Christianity” to willing service under the Gospel. It is as this “freedom to” becomes the mind-set of disciples that “freedom from” becomes more and more apparent, but both require persistence and vigilance. The poet Browning spoke about “Sin which steals back softly on the soul half-saved.” Christian freedom is to be expressed not in the indulgence of our own desires but in loving service to those around us in Jesus’ name.

184. They could not argue against “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin”—nor can we. Its truth is self-evident. Though they were physically descended from Abraham, they knew they were not free from the kind of slavery Jesus was describing. Old Testament history is replete with instances of God’s judgment of faithless, rebellious “offspring of Abraham” when they lost Abraham’s faith and trusted in their perfunctory religious practices. Jesus wanted these Jews to see that they, too, were guilty of this kind of mistrust, and needed a personal, spiritual freedom, the kind that only He could supply.

185. The status of a slave in a household is uncertain. He is in no sense a permanent part of a family. He may be sold or given to another owner. A son, on the other hand, by virtue of his relation to the father, his position as a son in the family, belongs permanently to the family. The point is this: one who is a slave of sin has no lasting place in God’s family, but those who have been given

sonship or daughterhood in the family of God through faith in His Son, Jesus, will never be disowned.

The First Lesson: Revelation 14:6–7

186. John was being given a tour of heaven in his vision. He had just seen the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and “with Him 144,000 who had His name and His Father’s name written on their foreheads” (v. 1)—this number is symbolic of all who are saved, with not one missing. He had heard a voice “like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder” and “like the sound of harpists playing on their harps” (v. 2). They were singing “a new song” that “no one could learn . . . except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth” (v. 3). Then the angel messenger flying in mid-heaven appears with the eternal Gospel. His presence, his loud voice, and his having “an eternal gospel to proclaim” underscores the basis for the whole scene: salvation by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The Gospel is an eternal Gospel because it has always been in the heart and mind of God, from before the creation of the world, and because it is definitive of what is at the center of His person and His will for His creation. There is only one Gospel, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, and it is always the same, from eternity to eternity. (See Ephesians 1; Galatians 1:6–9.) The angel messenger proclaims the eternal Gospel “to every nation and tribe and language and people.” In this scene, all of the New Testament era is compressed into this angel with the saving Gospel that is to be Good-Newsed to all. The Lord of the Church entrusts His Church with the Gospel, not just for our own benefit, but for the benefit of the whole world. The Gospel is for our hearing and believing but also for our Good-Newsing the world.

187. Pastors and teachers of the Church of today surely are represented by this angel messenger when they lead people into God’s Word, with the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ as the heart and center of their messages and their instruction.

188. We may all see ourselves in the angel messenger with the Gospel to proclaim when we take Christ’s commission seriously and diligently prepare ourselves to present the Gospel to others in a clear and winsome way. It helps to take the time to write out a Christian testimony based on Scripture and memorize it—not to use verbatim every time, but to have helpful phrases that can be utilized in the proper way at the proper time. This all begins, of course, with our personal study of the New Testament so we will be Spirit-equipped to be Christ’s ambassadors to those around us as He gives us opportunities. We also are called on to generously support the effort of the Church and its missionaries as they act on our behalf as well as on Christ’s behalf. (See 1 Peter 3:13–17; Philippians 1:3–6.)

189. The angel messenger’s announcing that “the hour of [God’s] judgment has come” relates to the eternal Gospel he proclaims in the fact that there is always an either/or element in the Gospel’s call: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved! Reject Jesus Christ and condemn yourself to an eternity without God.” (See John 3:16–18.) According to St. Paul, the same Gospel message becomes the fragrance of life for those who believe, but it is the fragrance of death for those who will not believe. (See 2 Corinthians 2:15–17.) The Gospel calls people to more than believing in principle that Jesus is the Savior. It calls to a relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and we as His servants, belonging to Him, eager to do His will in all matters. (See Luke 14:25–35.) One Christian teacher has suggested that we state this aloud to Christ, consciously turning over all we have and are to Him as His possessions, bought and paid for, and then receiving them back from Him as His gifts to us so we can use all we have and are to His glory as His willing disciples.

190. This lesson emphasizes God’s call to faith and discipleship through the eternal Gospel of Jesus. The Good News that Jesus offers frees us to give that to God willingly and lovingly.

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 3:19–28

Fill-in Answers: Paul said clearly that “by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight.”

God’s own answer to this human problem is a righteousness of God that comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. This is truly righteousness apart from Law. For when our being declared righteous by God is His gift through faith in Christ, then our observing laws or not observing laws doesn’t even come into consideration.

191. Paul showed that this new answer from God is universally needed because “there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” He stated that it is also universally applicable that they “are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” The motivation behind the righteousness of God that is given apart from the Law is God’s grace, His undeserved love. It is not a quality in the recipients that prompted God’s grace in Christ; it was the gracious quality of His being as God. The Old Testament consistently shows God to be the initiator of the covenant, a covenant of grace. The grace of God, of course, is to be responded to in obedient faith. The prophets took Israel to task for their faithless, perfunctory performance of religious ritual. The apostles, too, remind us that we should not receive the grace of God in vain, either by trusting partly in our merit or by abusing our freedom through willful sin.

192. **Fill-in Answers:** The result of redemption through Christ’s blood is that all human boasting is excluded.

The law (principle) of works that excludes boasting is found in the fact that the Law calls for obedience. Its demands are not satisfied by an agreement that what the Law sets forth is basically good. (See Galatians 3:12.) The Moral Law is indeed God’s instruction (that’s what *Torah* means) for right living, but its first effect is always to make us sinners conscious of our sin. Being 75 percent obedient to the Law does not qualify “good people” for eternal life anymore that 25 percent or 10 percent or 5 percent compliance by “bad people” does. Since the gift of God’s grace in Christ is the only way to salvation and it is offered to “good” and to “bad” alike, then those who are the recipients of this gift have absolutely no basis for boasting about it.

Paul’s Letter to the Romans formulates the Christian doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Christ more fully than any other New Testament book. Luther called it “the chief part of the New Testament, truly the purest Gospel.”

Lesson 13

All Saints' Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You knit together Your faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us so to follow Your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys You have prepared for those who love You; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 5:1–12

193. Those who are sincerely poor in spirit and turn in humble faith to Jesus to receive His gifts receive nothing less than the kingdom of God—His gracious rule in their hearts and lives, an eternal rule with eternal blessings. But for Him to come and rule us, we must be led by the Spirit fully to acknowledge our own emptiness before Him. When He graciously fills us and rules us, we know we are truly saved by grace alone, the ultimate basis of assurance.

194. Those who mourn over sin, especially their own, are comforted by Jesus' gift of forgiveness, with all that this means for our daily lives and for the gift of eternal life. With Jesus beside us to encourage and strengthen us, we can also endure sufferings, knowing that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18). Nothing will be able to separate us from Him and His love. (See Romans 8:28–39.)

195. Those who are not pushy and do not just grab for themselves but trust God's guidance and blessing of their efforts will find that He knows how to care for His own. This beatitude encourages us to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness," trusting that "all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). The promise is not overflowing wealth, though God can provide that too, if it is His will, but daily bread, the basic needs of life. That is what Jesus taught us to pray for, and Paul said, "If we have food and clothing, with these we will be content" (1 Timothy 6:8). The needy of the world, some of them fellow Christians, challenge us to become God's hand to provide them with food and clothing and shelter and to carry out programs by which they will again be able to provide for themselves. Meekness is not weakness but willingly looking beyond ourselves to see God's hand supplying our needs, which we also do so we can be His instrument to help others.

196. We receive full righteousness before God through faith in Christ. That gift does not come to us piecemeal, but is an ongoing gift, to be received each day anew in faith and to be acknowledged with thanksgiving to the Giver. When we see how far we are from the ideal of discipleship that Jesus describes, it should make us all the more hungry and thirsty for His continually setting things right with us, filling us with His gift of righteousness.

197. God's "filling station" is the Word and the Sacraments. They are the Means of Grace that bring the gracious power of the Holy Spirit into our lives. We should never travel far without stopping to fill up.

198. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” has to remind us of “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” This is the healing dynamic that Jesus has brought into our lives. When we let God’s forgiving love flow through us to others, we find that the living water He supplies always remains fresh and supportive of the abundant life He came to win for us. Being unmerciful or unforgiving toward others indicates that a person thinks he can go through life without needing God’s mercy and forgiveness himself. It is when we see our own need that we become understanding and responsive to the needs of others.

199. Pure hearts come only from Him whose pure heart led Him to love us and give Himself for us “while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8). Purity of heart is openness, single-mindedness, and integrity as we seek to do God’s will in serving others. The blessing of the pure in heart is that they will see God. That will be fully true in our life with Him in the eternal kingdom. In our present life, we see Him by faith and in the day-to-day experience of His presence with us and His interaction with us in our Christians lives. (See 1 Corinthians 13:12–13.)

200. Those who work for true peace between people and God and between people and people will be called “sons [and daughters] of God” because true peace is God’s will and purpose for humanity—it’s why He sent the Prince of Peace to be our Brother. There are times when peace with another person is beyond our achieving, when he or she insists on being antagonistic. All we can do is consciously forgive him or her in Jesus’ name, ask Jesus to forgive our own contributions to the impasse, and continue to be open to possibilities. Peacemakers are not to seek a peace at all costs. There are values in terms of Christian doctrine and morality that we are not to surrender just for the sake of peace. For example: bringing a clear witness to Jesus as the one way to the Father in the face of the world’s religious syncretism; rejecting the murder of the unborn in a society that legalizes abortion; refusing to be pressed into participating in morally questionable activities just to follow the crowd.

Fill-in Answers: Suffering for Christ leads Christians to rejoice and be glad because it is evidence of our identification with Christ. Ask yourself, “If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

The antithesis game may produce something like this: Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” but our world says, “Blessed are those with very high self-esteem.” Other opposites include mourn/self-fulfilled; meek/powerful; hunger and thirst after righteousness/are uninhibited and unrestrained; merciful/uninvolved; pure in heart/manipulators; peacemakers/movers and shakers; and persecuted/those who do what is expedient to avoid difficulties.

The First Lesson: Revelation 7:2–17

201. The great multitude in white robes are people from every nation, tribe, people, and language who have believed Jesus and have found eternal life in Him. They wear white robes because every soil and stain of their sin has been washed away in the blood of the Lamb. Blood itself is one of the most difficult stains to remove from cloth, but the blood of Jesus is a cleansing agent, cleansing us from all our sin. Palm branches symbolized victory and kingship—thus their use on Palm Sunday for what the people thought was a triumphant king coming to claim an earthly throne. The heavenly vision portrays the final culmination of their use in praise to God and the Lamb on the throne. “A great multitude that no one could number” says that the atoning work of the Lamb is effective for all of humanity and that millions have been its beneficiaries through faith. You and I may, by God’s grace, see ourselves included in the multitude.

202. They offer their praise to “God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” The focus of their praise is the salvation offered by God through the Lamb. At the multitude’s song of praise, all the angels and the elders and the four living creatures state their “Amen!” and join them in praising God.

203. The multitude in the vision “are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple” (specifically, the *naos*, the Holy Place in the temple). We are not given details about the life of service we will live in heaven, but this vision is more than a suggestion that life in heaven is one long worship service. It says that the throne of God and His temple, His evident presence with us, will be intrinsic to and pervade every aspect of the life of service that will happily occupy us in the new heaven and new earth. The rest of the paragraph and chapters 21–22 of Revelation underscore this.

204. Blessings promised in terms of negatives are “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. . . . And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

205. The great positive is expressed in these words: “The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water.” For people who lived and traveled on foot in a hot, dry climate, there could be no more appropriate picture. Point out the striking wordplay in describing the Lamb as the one who will be the Shepherd.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 John 3:1–3

206. Christians may be recognized by the world in general because of humanitarian service—as Mother Theresa of Bangladesh is honored by Christian and non-Christian alike. They may also be honored for their secular achievements in politics or business or science or the arts. But for Christians to be honored because we are born again as children of God through faith in Jesus is out of the question. The gift of rebirth in the power of the Holy Spirit is meaningless to those who have not themselves received the gift and its assurances. The world looks at outward actions; it doesn’t give credence to the inner beliefs of Christians as the basis of their actions. Witness the interview of a Christian athlete or other celebrity who credits the blessing of the Lord Jesus for his or her achievements. The interviewer usually doesn’t know how to handle this, and the network is eager to get on to something else. The world sees the Christian faith as just one of many ways by which people aim at becoming “good people.” It stumbles over testimony about being reborn to be “a new person” through faith in the one Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

207. Charismatic Christians sometimes put down those who do not speak in tongues. Individuals in a congregation may feel they are out on the fringe of congregational life because the regulars and leaders are a clique concerned largely with themselves. A congregation led by an influential pastor may one-up other congregations that are not growing as rapidly or don’t have as varied a program of activities or services. Think of other possibilities.

Fill-in Answers: John wrote, “What we will be has not yet appeared.” His words suggest it is sufficient to know that “we are God’s children now.”

208. We shall be like Jesus—with glorified bodies like His (Philippians 3:20–21), in full awareness of God’s presence with us (Revelation 21:1–4), in our reigning in glory with Him (2 Timothy 2:11–13), and in having God at the center of every aspect of our lives (Revelation 7:13–17).

209. The hope of eternal life that we have in Christ encourages us to begin living an otherworldly life, different from the general society around us. (In Bible terms, “holy” or “pure” means “different from” or “separated from.”) Verse 5 adds the motivational factor of always remembering that Jesus came to take away our sins. We love because He loved first.

Lesson 14

Proper 25

O God, You have commanded us to love You above all things and our neighbors as ourselves. Grant us the Spirit to think and do what is pleasing in Your sight, that our faith in You may never waver and our love for one another may not falter; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 22:34–46

210. All of the Law and the Prophets depend on these two great commandments in the sense that this is the ultimate purpose of God's Word: to produce in us a living faith/love relationship with God that will be expressed also in our interactions with one another. That was part of God's intention in creating man in His own image.

211. Commands influence outward behavior, but no commands, not even "the great and first" and the one "like it," will achieve God's goal of a living relationship with Him in people who are sinful, so this whole thrust must be understood in relation to the covenant of grace and blessing and its fulfillment in Jesus. It is Jesus who initiated and carried out our redemption. Faith in Him is central to the renewal of relationship with God that He called being born again.

212. The second great commandment is "like" the first—part of God's intention for those whom He created and has re-created in Christ. There is no practical way for us to show agape love for our Lord other than by showing agape love to others for whom He lived and died and rose again, just as He did for us. In Luke's Gospel, this summarizing of the Law is a prelude to the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which Jesus turned the scribe's limiting "Who is my neighbor?" around to a nonlimiting "Who was being a neighbor?"

213. In quoting Psalm 110, Jesus was clarifying the Bible truth that it is not enough to see the Christ just as a son of David, who might be expected to use David's tactics to establish Himself. Jesus pointed out that David himself, under inspiration of the Spirit, recognized his Descendant to be his *Adon*, one who would sit at the right hand of Yahweh until all his enemies were brought into subjection. As a result, it should not surprise us that to establish His kingdom, the Christ would employ surprising, spiritual tactics.

214. The Jewish leaders stumbled at the thought of the Messiah being the very Son of God and living among them as one of them. It was this truth and Jesus' bold acknowledgment of it under oath that prompted them to condemn Him to death. (See Matthew 26:57–66.)

215. As a result of Jesus' powerful use of the Scriptures, the Pharisees were silenced and no longer dared to approach Him with their questions.

216. Jesus' words give added meaning to our faith by pointing out again that He, our Lord and Savior, is none other than the Son of God. They give added direction to our lives by reminding us

that the only proper expression of our faith is a willing love for Him that is displayed in a purposeful love for one another.

The Old Testament Lesson: Leviticus 19:1–2, 15–18

217. Respect for father and mother is the foundation of respect for all the authorities who represent God in our lives. A society will not long endure when such respect is absent. Our children need to understand that when they disrespect their parents and others in authority, they are disrespecting God. Parents need to remember that our behavior toward our children should command respect. Then we will less likely be in a position in which we will have to demand respect.

218. Observance of the Sabbath (Rest) Day—no work from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday; a day for rest and family interaction and worship—honored Yahweh as the Creator of all. That was described as His pattern in the creation of all there is. Their obedience to God’s unique commands set Israel apart from the nations as the Lord’s uniquely chosen people. Disregard of the Sabbath was tantamount to disregard of the covenant.

219. Justice under the Law demands the same laws for all and their dispassionate application to all. Having one set and one application of laws for the poor and another for the rich can only mean that a society is not ruled by the Law but by prejudice.

220. Slanderous words destroy life by ruining a good reputation—as “deadly” to a person’s position and possibilities in society as are careless actions that endanger his life.

221. The Holiness Code commanded, “You shall not hate your brother in your heart. . . . You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge. . . , but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

222. The love God has for us He has also for our neighbor, and He assigns us responsibility for our neighbor’s welfare. Bringing loving admonition and frank warning about God’s judgment against wrongdoing makes the brother or neighbor responsible for himself and clears us of silent complicity in his wrongdoing. Love does not just mind its own business; it speaks a frank word of admonition when that is needed.

223. Loving your neighbor as yourself means that you value him and want the best for him, just as you value yourself and want the best for yourself.

224. “I am the LORD your God” reminded, motivated, and enabled Israel. It was the Lord who initiated the covenant that bound them to Him; they were to be willing responders. In the same way, the name of Jesus, our Savior, binds us to Him and motivates and enables us to serve Him in love.

225. This lesson is tied directly to the Holy Gospel because Jesus quoted from it as “the second great commandment” in giving His answer to the Pharisees.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 2:1–13

Paul, busy with his lengthy work in Corinth, was concerned about the Church in Thessalonica. Franzmann wrote in *The Word of the Lord Grows*:

Would they stand fast under the persecution which had come upon them? Would they misunderstand his departure and his continued absence from them? . . . Remember that Paul and his companions were not the only propagandists and pleaders for a cause that traveled the Roman roads in those days; they were part of a numerous and motley troupe of philosophers, rhetoricians, propagandists for various foreign and domestic cults, missionaries, charlatans, and quacks who went from town to town, all intent on getting a hearing, all eager for money or fame or both. These usually came and went, never to be heard from again. Paul would in the popular mind be classified with them. And Paul in Thessalonica, A.D. 51, was not yet the apostle Paul as the church has learned to see him since; he was simply a hitherto unknown little

Jew who had come and gone. . . . The church of Thessalonica would of itself not be minded to classify Paul thus; but his enemies would, and they would thus undermine his apostolic authority and, with it, the faith in the Gospel with which he was identified as apostle. (pp. 66–67)

Fill-in Answers: Paul said his appeal did “not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive” the Thessalonians.

226. Paul was “approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel” when the Lord came to him as he was going to Damascus to arrest Christians. Immediately Paul recognized that his dedication to snuffing out the Christian movement was contrary to the saving will of God. Jesus, whom the Jews’ leaders rejected and crucified, is indeed the promised Messiah. When Paul testified about this when on trial before King Agrippa, he told them that Jesus said, “[I will be] delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.” (See Acts 26:12–18.)

227. Paul could have pleased his critics by having Gentile converts circumcised as well as baptized and by placing them under the dietary requirements of the ceremonial law. He could have told himself that they still would be putting their faith in Jesus. Or would they? Paul saw that a “Jesus plus” approach to the Christian faith and life nullifies the Good News of a once-for-all atonement. (See Galatians 2:20–21.) It adds a human-effort element to salvation, and the result is either false pride or doubt and uncertainty. Paul’s steadfastness kept the Church from being just a Jewish sect and established the freedom of Christians under the Gospel. Sadly, the human logic of works-righteousness was reintroduced. A “Jesus plus” thrust is still evident in Roman Catholic theology. Roman Catholics sometimes refer to Lutheranism as “Catholicism Light” because we emphasize our freedom in Christ and do not add church rules as necessary for salvation, as Catholicism does. Thank God for Martin Luther and others, who took their stand beside Paul as defenders of the scriptural doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, apart from works of the Law. (See Romans 3:19–28.) We, of course, know that we are compelled to live for Jesus and His kingdom because we have been saved by His once-for-all atonement. (See 2 Corinthians 5:14–15.) But we know also that trusting in our ability to live sinlessly for Jesus and His kingdom to make our salvation sure and certain is building on shifting sand.

228. Paul said he and his companions “worked night and day, that we might not be a burden” to the Thessalonian Christians. He did not greedily get all he could out of them while he was with them.

229. Paul worked at making sails and tents out of heavy cloth. He had grown up in a wealthy home in Tarsus, a seaport town on the southern coast of today’s Turkey. His father had even been able to purchase Roman citizenship for himself and his family. But Jewish tradition required that boys, even in wealthy families, be taught a trade by which they could earn a living, if necessary, by the work of their hands.

230. Here Paul said only that he didn’t want to be a burden to his friends, the Thessalonian Christians. There was a deeper reason, however. He wanted to proclaim a Gospel of Jesus free of charge, a Gospel clearly seen to be fully a gift of grace from the Lord Himself. He wanted nothing to stand in the way of people’s accepting it and benefiting from it.

231. Many of the Thessalonian Christians were Gentiles. He had to work patiently but also firmly with them to help them grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ—exhorting, encouraging, and charging, like a father with his children. He told them he was most grateful that “when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.” This is one of the statements in the New Testament that claims that the message of Christ as Savior and Lord, transmitted verbally at first and only later in written form, is no less than the Word of God.

Lesson 15

Proper 26

Merciful and gracious Lord, You cause Your Word to be proclaimed in every generation. Stir up our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit that we may receive this proclamation with humility and finally be exalted at the coming of Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 23:1–12

232. Jesus judged the Pharisees and their scribes to be guilty of doing their religious acts primarily to be seen by the people. This is a scathing judgment of the religious leaders, who should have been leading their people to a personal relationship of faith and life with Yahweh through His Word, but who themselves were largely a hollow shell of religiosity. When you make a show of your religion with the aim of impressing people around you, the only reward you get is that the people may be impressed and think that you are very religious. When that is the case, however, God knows—and usually you also know—that what constitutes real faith and discipleship, a relationship of the heart, is missing.

Fill-in Answers: Jesus judged them for ostentatiously making their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, loving the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues, and loving to receive greetings in the marketplaces and being called “rabbi” by others.

233. In telling them not to seek to be called “rabbi” or “father” or “instructor,” and not to give others such titles, Jesus was saying that His disciples are not to seek or confer on others a status that establishes a false hierarchy and encourages pride. In the Early Church, the “titles” by which the Christians referred to one another and their leaders were “brother” and “sister.” There is always a danger when we seek to confer special titles. Though we may insist that in the Church, all are equals, this practice may suggest that some are “more equal” than others. At the same time, the Church may indeed want to honor those who serve by honoring the office in which they serve in the Church, respecting them as pastors, teachers, doctors of theology, and such, not because of their persons, but because of the service they are giving to the Church. However, the one so honored is placed in a situation of temptation. He or she must work hard at personal introspection on the basis of the Word to keep from being puffed up with a sense of his or her own importance. Remember Jesus’ words about faithful service: “When you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” (Luke 17:10).

234. The title and reputation that every Christian should be aiming at is “servant.” That’s what the word *minister* means. This is because we are willing servants of the Servant of the Lord who willingly gave Himself as God’s atoning sacrifice for our sins. Since He served us in this way, we really don’t need to seek service from others—we have all we need in Christ. Thus we are enabled to humble ourselves to serve one another in His name instead of expecting others to serve us. (See Matthew 20:26–28.)

235. When you are full of yourself and congratulating yourself for your goodness, there will be no room for Christ and for praising Him for His grace.

The Old Testament Lesson: Micah 3:5–12

236. The judgment of God that the false prophets would experience would have immediate effect on their real purpose, which they were corrupting. They were to be the Lord’s spokesmen, but “it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without divination,” and they would be “disgraced” and “put to shame.” “Cover[ing] their lips” (hiding their inability to prophesy honestly) would be their experience because “there is no answer from God” to their pro forma prayers for guidance. Unfortunately, in such a corrupt situation, they would just go on carrying out a pretense of speaking for the Lord. Micah carried out the prophetic tradition of boldly saying, “I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might.” Micah would “declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin.” That was the major tradition of the Lord’s prophets, who appeared on the scene to speak the Lord’s judgment for Him in times of Israel’s defection and need of correction.

237. The corruption infected political and religious leaders and the people. Politicians gave “judgment for a bribe.” Priests taught “for a price.” Prophets practiced “divination for money.” The greatest sin of the leaders was continuing to project the image that they were “lean[ing] on the LORD” as they brought their false assurances. When God’s representatives are involved in corruption and continue to pretend and go through the motions of being faithful, the Lord’s judgment against them is more severe, and the probability of their true repentance decreases. History records much political and ecclesiastical corruption. Our society has been burdened with the images of TV evangelists caught in corrupt practices, homosexual priests abusing young boys, and political leaders getting “photo ops” by attending church and carrying their Bibles, while privately engaging in immoralities.

238. People tend to trust their leaders, especially their religious leaders. They will follow their guidance into false securities and even into participating in the leaders’ corrupt teachings and practices. That’s why John reminds us to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” (See 1 John 4:1–3.) The people of Jerusalem were hearing what they wanted to hear. They were quite ready to continue the corrupt status quo because of the false security: “Is not the LORD in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us.” The end result would be “Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house [the temple hill] a wooded height.” This prediction was fulfilled when Babylon conquered Judah and then, when their appointed vassal rulers rebelled, Jerusalem and the beautiful temple of Solomon were destroyed.

239. The clear warning is against professionalism on the part of the clergy—their becoming proud rulers of the Church in all matters, instead of humble servants of the Word; their seeking financial rewards and lavish homes and worldly lifestyles, instead of modeling the simpler life; their giving well-to-do members priority attention over the more lowly. (See 1 Timothy 3:1–7.) The warning to members is to not want their spiritual leaders just to scratch their itchy ears with comfortable reassurances, but continually to call them to repentance, faith, and committed discipleship through the Word. (See 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 4:3–4.)

240. Micah’s judgment of the false leaders and priests and prophets of Jerusalem readily relate to Jesus’ exposure of the falseness of the proud Pharisees in the Holy Gospel.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12

241. Paul's first thrust was "the Lord is an avenger in all these things"—a Law threat. This Law statement in this context catches our attention so we see that the Lord is serious about His purposes in sexuality and that sexual immorality does come under His judgment—immediately in its effect in the sinner and ultimately in his relationship with God. This thrust leads us to repent and to learn and to implement the will of God also in this. Paul's second thrust was "God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness." This holds out the ideal of the Gospel call and the promise of blessing as we seek God's help to pursue that ideal.

242. This problem grew out of a mistaken idea that Jesus was going to return "any day now." This must have led some to focus frantically just on that. They intruded in the personal affairs of other Christians and became a burden to the congregation because they stopped working and were idly waiting for and talking about Jesus' return. Paul dealt with the coming of the Lord in the following part of his letter in an attempt to correct these problems. Paul was not just concerned with what this was doing to the Christians themselves. In telling such busybodies to live quietly, to mind their own affairs, and to work with their hands, Paul's concern was "so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one."

243. We may think that internal squabbles in the Church can be kept quiet and private, but experience shows that word of such situations, if they are perpetuated and not properly resolved, will leak into the community, and the worst opinions of outsiders will be confirmed. The general attitude will be "They think they are so good, but their being in the Church has not made them any better than anyone else." This not only does not attract people to the Church, but it also distracts people from the Gospel message that we are all sinners who stand under the mercy of God in Christ Jesus—and that we are to reflect that mercy as we love and forgive one another.

Lesson 16

Proper 27

Lord God, heavenly Father, send forth Your Son to lead home His Bride, the Church, that with all the company of the redeemed we may finally enter into His eternal wedding feast; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 25:1–13

244. The point around which the parable turns is the contrast between the wise virgins, who brought a supply of oil for their lamps, and the foolish virgins, who just brought their lamps without a thought for the additional oil they might need. Wisdom is shown in being serious about being prepared; folly is shown in carelessness that neglects preparation. This is true in many aspects of life, but it is especially true in the matter of preparing for eternity.

245. All interpreters recognize that the oil is that which makes the difference between true Christians and pseudo-Christians, namely, faith. The words of 2 Timothy 3:5 speak about the form of godliness without its power—a description of those who may be church members, even active and contributing members, but only outwardly, with some other spirit than the Spirit of Jesus motivating them.

246. That all ten thought they were ready suggests that unconverted, unspiritual church members may indeed be foolishly convinced that everything is okay between them and the Lord because they are church members and “believe in Jesus.” But Jesus says that life in the Kingdom involves more than just saying “Lord, Lord”—even by those who are busy church workers.

247. The fact that the wise virgins could share their oil with the foolish ones stresses the principle of individual responsibility. Each generation must relate to Jesus in faith and life for itself—so the Church is always one or two generations away from possible extinction. Only when this is true, however, is the grace of God that leads people to a Spirit-powered, personal relationship with Christ fully significant in making each of us “a wise virgin” with lamp trimmed and fully supplied with oil.

248. A sincere response to Christ in the commitment of discipleship does not happen just through our making up our minds to give it. All of our faith and the Christian life it produces are gracious gifts from God. His Spirit speaks to our hearts through Word and Sacrament. This Word of Christ is “power to make things happen,” power to regenerate sinners, just as His creative Word at the beginning was power to bring all things into existence. Listening eagerly to the Word, as in this Holy Gospel, develops in us a sense of urgency that sees our earthly lives as temporary opportunities under the grace of God to show our love for Him who loved us first by representing Him in word and deed. Christians generally find that the more they get into the Word in personal study, the more they feel the urgency to get deeper into that Word. The more they conscientiously respond to the call

to discipleship, the more they feel the urgency to grow in their readiness to attempt more for Christ and to expect more from Him.

A story is told of a group of students talking about the secret of living lives of deep meaning. A professor suggested, “Live the day before you die for God.” One student asked, “How can we do that? We don’t know the day we will die.” “Then,” the teacher said, “I suppose you will have to live every day for God. It’s as simple as that.”

The Old Testament Lesson: Amos 5:18–24

249. The people of Israel and their leaders, in their self-satisfying prosperity, were proudly anticipating that the Day of the Lord would only confirm them and exalt them as the people of the Lord. They expected that they would share in His glory as the Lord of all the earth. A desire for continued prosperity and for protection from Assyria were probably behind these false hopes and expectations. Amos declared that the Day of the Lord that they would experience would be a day of darkness and not light, “pitch-dark” without a ray of brightness, because of the judgment of the Lord against them for their idolatry and for their disregard of social justice. The fact was that a perfunctory performance of religious ritual being carried out at Bethel would not shield them from the Lord’s wrath.

250. Amos’s descriptions of a man running from a lion only to be confronted by a bear and a man entering the safety of a house only to be bitten by a serpent point to the fact that God’s just judgment against faithlessness and injustice is inescapable.

251. The Lord had commanded the religious rituals as the means by which His grace would be appropriated by His people as they approached Him in faith in His covenant, but He hated the rituals as they were being carried out in perfunctory ways by insincere people. God is not fooled by outward appearance, but judges the thoughts and intents of the heart. (See Psalm 139:1–11; 1 Corinthians 4:5.)

252. The prerequisite for acceptable worship is always a matter of our putting our faith into practice in active love toward others. We fool ourselves if we think we may cheat and hurt others and callously disregard their needs—and cover it up by attending church and going through the motions of our liturgies. God looks for justice and righteousness in our dealings with those around us. Then we will not just ignore circumstances that have become obstacles between us and our Lord when we come in faith and love to worship Him.

253. God looks for justice and righteousness that are continuous and ongoing, not temporary and occasional. Our worship is never to dry up.

254. The Holy Gospel points us to the ultimate Day of the Lord. This lesson reminds us that being ready is not just a matter of sentimental “believing,” but a call for a faith that is expressed in consistent justice and righteousness.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

255. Implicit in speaking of the death of Christians as “falling asleep” is the living hope of eternal life beyond the grave to which all who “sleep in Jesus” will be awakened.

256. The hope that sustains Christians as they grieve for departed loved ones is that their spirits are with Christ and that when Christ comes again, they will be united with their resurrected bodies and be fully equipped for life in the new heaven and new earth. All human societies have some sense of hope that this life is not all there is—and most religions display this hope. Philosophically and theologically, we may see this fact itself as evidence that an awareness of a destiny beyond the grave is built into man’s consciousness, part of the original image of God. Christians do not base their

hope just on some inner feeling, however. The basis of our hope is the fact that the Living Word, who became our Brother in the flesh, died and rose again and lives to rule all things. He promised, “Because I live, you also will live” (John 14:19). That Paul could say “Through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep” encourages us to believe that while the body that housed a person during his earthly life is lifeless and decaying, his spirit is alive and safely with Jesus, awaiting the resurrection of the body on the day when Christ returns in glory. (See Romans 8:23.)

257. Paul assured the Thessalonians that Christians who die will not miss out on the glory to be revealed in us, thus allaying their fears and concerns. For us today, it still says we don’t have to cling to life desperately, as many do, even beyond real viability, but can look death in the face and even welcome it.

258. The command, the archangel, and the trumpet are apocalyptic images that assert the universality and finality of the *Parousia* of the triumphant Jesus Christ.

259. Clouds were often used in the Bible as the setting for theophanies, so “Christ will come in the clouds of heaven” (see Matthew 24:30) is an understandable description of His return in glory. God is “up”—above us. Being told that we will be caught up to “meet the Lord in the air” assures us that all who are in Christ will joyously receive Him, will be received by Him, and will be fully equipped for the life to come.

Lesson 17

Proper 28

Almighty and ever-living God, You have given exceedingly great and precious promises to those who trust in You. Dispel from us the works of darkness and grant us to live in the light of Your Son, Jesus Christ, that our faith may never be found wanting; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 25:14–30

260. The story turns on the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of servants in using what their master entrusted to them to realize a gain for him. The master entrusted varied amounts to his servants based on their varied ability and, as the rest of the parable shows, had varied expectations of them on the basis of their abilities. We in Christ's kingdom are not all the same. We have different gifts and abilities, and some possess a greater quantity or depth of gifts than others, but all are to be used to the service of God.

261. The Lord is pleased with smaller results by people with fewer abilities when they have faithfully used their abilities, just as He is pleased with larger results by people blessed with more abilities. In the world of men, it is the size of the results that matters. In the kingdom of heaven, it is the faithfulness of the servants that matters.

262. The unfaithful servant admitted he knew his master was demanding, "reaping where [he] did not sow, and gathering where [he] scattered no seed." He knew what was expected and that his master gave him what was needed to succeed in his service. His attempt to excuse himself because of fear of failure was just not acceptable to the master. The master called him "wicked" and not just "slothful" because, though fully aware of what his master expected of him, he had failed to perform his duties. Christians who lazily disregard their discipleship duties are being similarly wicked, for they are rejecting their Lord's expectations of them and doubting His promises to them.

263. "Fair" does not enter into this consideration. The master's rewarding the one who already had the most is simply the way it happens. It's true in the world that "them that has, gets." Also in the Kingdom, those blessed by the Lord with significant abilities who faithfully use those abilities for Him and His kingdom usually are the recipients of significant spiritual blessings as they live in awareness that they are serving their Lord, and do it as faithfully as they can. At the same time and in the same way, those in the Kingdom who are gifted less significantly do rejoice when they are able to serve their Lord in ways commensurate with their abilities—and, since it is their Lord's good will, they are able to rejoice and praise their Lord that He uses others whom He has blessed with greater abilities even more productively in the life of the Kingdom. Also in this aspect it is not a question of "fairness." That the worthless servant is thrown out is not vindictiveness on the part of the master so much as evidence that the servant has not really been a part of the master's household as he should have been. The Christian who wants to be a "believer" without being a disciple really

has not entered the kingdom of heaven as a servant (slave) of Jesus. The Lord knows those who are His!

264. The parable surely tells us that we all have our own gifts and abilities and that they are given to us by our Lord with some expectation on His part. They are to be used for Him and His kingdom. The parable also reminds us of what is obvious—that we are not all gifted in the same way and same measure, but each has gifts, and each has the opportunity and responsibility to use them for the Lord. Paul’s picture of the Church as a body in which each member is gifted to make its own particular and needed contribution to the benefit of the whole is pertinent. (See 1 Corinthians 12:4–27.)

The Old Testament Lesson: Zephaniah 1:7–16

265. The attitude the prophet advises as the Day of the Lord approaches is to “be silent before the Lord GOD!” It’s good advice whether anticipating the Lord’s judgment or His rescue and salvation. (See Psalm 46:10.)

266. For the prophet to call God’s judgment of His people “a sacrifice” that will be carried out by invited “guests” is a terrible judgment of the perfunctory practice of “religion” in the temple into which the Jews had fallen. It mocked their faithless approach by using the language of the temple cults. Those invited “guests” are pagan conquerors, mainly Babylon—chosen and set apart by the Lord to fulfill His purposes. The Lord did use pagan nations for His purposes in their attacks on Israel. Isaiah even refers to Cyrus, king of Persia, as the Lord’s “anointed.” (See Isaiah 45:1.)

267. The people of Jerusalem doubted that the Lord had been active in the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Their attitude was “things just happen.” They were complacent because they were in Jerusalem, where the Lord’s temple stood; surely He would not let His holy city be destroyed. This was behind their thinking that “The LORD will not do good, nor will He do ill.” The people of Judah would be completely under the power and control of others. Their conquerors would be the beneficiaries of all of their efforts, not they. Those carried off into exile surely experienced that.

268. This lesson describes the Day of the Lord as a time of intense judgment. The Holy Gospel shows the King returning in glory to separate those who are His own and have served Him faithfully from those who are not and have not.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

269. The one thing Paul could say and the Thessalonian Christians could know for sure about the coming of the Lord is that He will come “like a thief in the night”—suddenly, unexpectedly, without advance notice other than the signs to which Jesus had pointed.

Fill-in Answers: Paul lets us know that we will be ready for that day when we live as “children of light, children of the day”—in contrast with those are “of the night or of the darkness.”

270. We again meet Paul’s favorite trilogy of Christian characteristics. We are to wear faith and love as a breastplate and put on the hope of salvation as a helmet. Thus armed, we will be equipped for continuing battle with the worldly forces that would lead us to live for the moment instead of with an eye to eternity.

Lesson 18

Proper 29

Eternal God, merciful Father, You have appointed Your Son as judge of the living and the dead. Enable us to wait for the day of His return with our eyes fixed on the kingdom prepared for Your own from the foundation of the world; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 25:31–46

271. The nations will appear before Christ as He sits on His throne of glory for eternal judgment. (See Hebrews 9:27–28.) The parable of the sheep and the goats is very vivid. Syrian sheep were white; Syrian goats were black. This is no fuzzy, questionable judgment; the distinctions are clear! The Good News of salvation by grace through faith in Christ will not be changed at the Last Day into a judgment on the basis of works. It is faith (relationship with Christ) or lack of faith (lack of relationship with Christ), not works or lack of works, that immediately determines the separation of the sheep and the goats. Relationship with Christ is the determining factor in life now and will be eternally. (See John 3:16–18.)

272. The King will make a point of “As you did/did not do” as evidence that will vindicate and validate God’s surprising solution to the problem of human sin: His gracious gift of salvation to those who respond to Him in faith! In effect, it says publicly and plainly, “See? It worked! Lives were changed and were brought into relationship with God by the Good News of Jesus Christ.”

273. “The least of these My brothers” refers to Christians, who are His brothers and sisters regardless of how lowly and needy they may be. This is the same Jesus who said, “Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward” (Matthew 10:42). In saying “as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me,” Jesus was stating that just as He Himself is the focal point of our faith, He is also the focal point of our Christian lives. Jesus is saying that He meets us in the persons of the needy, especially needy fellow Christians, whom we help in His name. Just as He meets us to give Himself to our faith in Word and Sacrament, so He meets us to receive our love in the love we show others. In Basel, Switzerland, is St. Martin’s Church. A sculpture on the front wall depicts Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier with strong Christian convictions. One cold winter day, entering a city, Martin was stopped by a beggar. Having no money, Martin took off his coat, cut it in two, and gave half to the beggar. That night he had a dream of heaven. Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier’s coat. An angel asked Him, “Master, why are You wearing that battered old cloak?” And Jesus answered, “My servant Martin gave it to Me.”

274. Sometimes we who rightly value and emphasize “by grace alone through faith alone” are tempted to ignore Jesus’ call to active discipleship. This picture of the judgment shows how serious our Lord is in His desire for faith that is a living relationship with Him, faith that prompts us to look

for ways to meet Him in serving others. Can we “make up our minds” to love? Yes!—when it is agape love, for agape is conscious, intelligent, purposeful love.

275. Some practical ways to practice agape: ask God to help you reach out in your own life setting to individuals in their need, and don’t sidestep opportunities to serve Jesus when He brings individuals to you; support Christian social ministry agencies with money and effort; encourage responsible governmental social service programs. The help given in every case needs to be intelligently given—as assistance to help them get back into taking care of themselves as much as they can.

276. Why bother? Because our Lord bothered enough to give Himself for us and to send His Spirit to renew us and tie us to Him in faith. And here He makes it clear that He wants more than words from us. He wants obedience to the will of God in a life that imitates His. (See Matthew 7:21–27.)

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24

277. The two thrusts: the Lord as Shepherd will search for sheep that are lost, and when they are restored to His flock, He will faithfully care for them.

278. The Church and its leaders always have to keep the functions of both of these thrusts in mind. It is intrinsic to the Great Commission that we disciple the nations by reaching out with the Good News and by then nourishing them as we teach all that the Lord has commanded. This is a “both/and” responsibility: evangelism and pastoral care are both necessary if the flock is to grow and prosper.

279. The restoration promised through Ezekiel would come to pass in the history of Judah in Persia’s conquest of Babylon, when Cyrus the Great would allow a remnant of the Jews to return to Judea under Zerubbabel, a Davidic prince, to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. However, the description of the Shepherd’s care and the blessings that would result surely points us, for its ultimate fulfillment, to the eternal messianic kingdom.

Shepherds value the fat and the strong in their flocks—in fact, it is their aim that all of their sheep fit that description. In this instance, however, these terms referred to Jews who had adapted to their situations in the exile so wholeheartedly that they had become prosperous, even at the expense of fellow Jews. Ezekiel’s words may be seen as implying that they were also guilty of spiritual pride in their self-centeredness.

280. Ezekiel’s reference to “David” as the one shepherd and prince is obviously messianic in its thrust. It really was pointing to the promised Son of David who was to fulfill the covenant of grace and blessing, our Lord Jesus Christ.

281. This lesson’s ties to the Holy Gospel may be seen in the picture of Shepherd and sheep in both and in the fact that both speak about the ethical behavior that is required of those who are sheep in the flock.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 15:20–28

The Christian hope is for continued personal identity in a new life—with new bodies that will be suited to life in the new heaven and new earth. (See Philippians 3:20–21.) The Bible does not give a lot of details regarding lifestyle in the eternal kingdom. But it does indicate that “you will be you, and I will be me” and that we will live in full awareness of our Lord’s loving presence. (See Revelation 21:1–4.)

282. That Christ is the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” gives us assurance that those who “sleep in Jesus” will be raised to new life just as He was. Since Christ was raised as God’s own

firstfruits and is “waved” before God and proclaimed to us through the Gospel, we know the whole field of grain will be harvested at its appropriate time. In fact, as Paul wrote about this in Ephesians, he reverted to the Old Testament’s way of speaking about future events in the past tense. The assurance in this is that because God has promised it, it is as good as done. (See Isaiah 53; Ephesians 2:4–7.)

283. We speak of “original sin,” the sinful condition that is ours because of our connection to the original sinner, the “federal head” of humanity, whose actions infected all humans to follow. Because of this, we all are predisposed to sin; there is none who does not sin. (See Ecclesiastes 7:20.) God allowed sin to spoil His creation because He desires willing, loving obedience. He created the man and the woman with free will, with the ability to say yes to Him but also the possibility of saying no to Him, because a yes is meaningful only when a no is possible. Sinful humanity no longer has the free-will capability to say no to sin and yes to God—except through God’s power in the Holy Spirit.

284. In His holiness and justice, God could not just dismiss sin, pretend it isn’t there, or coexist with it. His love compelled Him to act to restore what had been lost. In Christ, He provided a new “federal head” for humanity. As Representative Man, through His obedient life, His vicarious suffering, and His victorious resurrection, Jesus redeemed and rescued fallen humanity, winning redemption for all mankind. Through His Spirit, by faith in His redemption, we are brought to say a new yes to God and a no to sin. (See Ephesians 4:17–24.)

285. Death will be destroyed when Christ returns in glory, raises all who have lived to stand before Him in the judgment, and, His mission of salvation completed, turns over the Kingdom to God the Father. The present age will be concluded, and the new heaven and new earth will replace it. The “where” of this climactic event is best described as “everywhere.” His coming will be like the lightning that flashes in the east and shines into the west. No one anywhere will be unaware of His coming.

286. Christ’s delivering the Kingdom to God the Father and being subject to Him will not be a demotion, but will be the final act by which He completes the saving work He was sent to accomplish. It’s hard to think of One who was highly exalted because He had willingly humbled Himself to be obedient to His Father’s saving will (Philippians 2:5–11) then having to be subjected again. Paul is evidently saying that Christ, His work completed, will willingly return the authority that had been committed to Him (Matthew 28:18) back to His Father—and God will be all in all.