

Dear members and friends of St. John Lutheran,

Dr. C. F. W. Walther, the first president of our synod, wrote many devotions about the Christian faith. The following is one that he wrote concerning Psalm 38:18: *"I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin."*

The **impenitent [spiritually lost] person** who is **not** anxious about his sins is more than happy to join the chorus that proclaims, "We are all sinners; we are all poor, weak men; each one has his faults." When such a person joins in this song, he thinks he has enough knowledge of his sins.

The anguish over sin that dwells in the heart of a **penitent [saved] person** shows itself differently. This individual is in no way satisfied with coldly joining in the confession of the whole world. He is anxious to recognize his sin rightly... To do this, he examines all the works of his daily life to see if he has done and is doing what God's Word commands in the vocation and position in which God has placed him. A penitent and godly person needs to conduct this self-examination with a hearty and sincere earnestness. He turns to God and implores Him for the enlightenment and desire of His Holy Spirit. Thus he will daily find a multitude of great and serious sins in himself.

His anguish over sins also consists in making certain he obtains forgiveness. When the **impenitent [lost] person** remembers his sins, he usually **comforts himself** by thinking God is kind and therefore He will not be so particular, or that he will improve, or even that the presence of Jesus in the world means an individual doesn't need to worry about sins.

The **penitent [saved] person** knows **otherwise**. He knows God is indeed particular. He knows his future improvement does not exonerate him from past sins. He knows that **hasty thoughts about Jesus** do not constitute faith. He refuses to build the forgiveness of sins upon such an uncertain and false foundation. To him, the **forgiveness of his sins is the most necessary, important, and precious thing in this world**... Therefore, he diligently reads God's Word, listens to evangelical preaching, and inquires of experienced pastors and other longtime Christians how he can be certain he has God's forgiveness. When he hears he must simply believe in the Word, which offers the forgiveness of sins to all people, he does not soothe himself with a fleeting devotion to Jesus. Instead, he turns to God in prayer and implores, "O God, give me the right faith in Your Word. Protect me from empty self-deception. Let Your Word of grace sink to the bottom of my heart so I may know You have also received me. Give me the testimony of Your Holy Ghost!" ⁽¹⁾

When the person comes to church and confesses his sins at the beginning of worship, thinking "my sins are no big deal," or "I'm a good person without any serious sins to speak of", or "I'm cool, because Christ covers my sinful life," Walther is reminding that person that **their spiritual life is in a very precarious place**: They are playing with eternal destruction – **eternal life in Hell**. The 'impenitent' soul is one that doesn't experience God's true grace, because they refuse to be led by God.

You see, God uses His Law to show us **our sin** (that means '**my personal transgressions**'). Seeing sin as 'no big deal' is like looking at Jesus' death on the cross as 'no big deal.' When we diminish the importance of sin, we diminish the importance of Christ! One might conclude from reading Walther that we will forever be uncertain about our eternal home, if we can't find comfort in God's abundant

grace. But that's not the case. In a paradoxical sense, **we find comfort in the uncomfortable knowledge of our sin.** It's in **the struggle with sin,** that God comforts us with the knowledge of His great love for us – that He died for us and forgives us of all our sin. The impenitent man or woman that sees sin as a “no big deal” has crafted for themselves a false comfort, based on a false god that cares nothing about how they live their life.

Confession at the beginning of worship is a **serious time of reflection** on the mess that sin has been making in my life during the past week. If it helps, considering coming to worship 5 to 10 minutes early, and spend that extra time reflecting on your sin during the past week. Reflect on the mess that your sin has caused you and others. And then, when the time comes for confession, and the moment of silence is observed, let the heart ‘unload’ the sin that God has led you to see. Take refuge in the Word of God that frees you from those sins and all others, and then shows you the grace that comes from a God that loves you so much He would die in your place.

Finally, Walther reminds us that the penitent [saved] person “diligently reads God’s Word, listens to evangelical preaching, and inquires of experienced pastors and other longtime Christians how he can be certain he has God’s forgiveness.” **Christianity is no ‘game.’** It isn’t forgiveness based on jumping through hoops, like attending church regularly. **Christianity is a changed life** – God working to kill the **old sinful self,** and replace it with **a heart and mind that resembles Christ.** The response of the penitent [saved] person is to seek to grow closer to God by listening earnestly to sermons, attending Bible studies, and the practice of daily devotions and prayer. Sure, we’ll stumble into sin, but that’s part of the struggle we all share with our sinful human nature. May God work in you to help you see clearly the seriousness of sin in your life, and lead you beside still waters, as He comforts you with His grace.

Pastor Travis

(1) Grabenhofer, G. P., God Grant It – Daily Devotions from C. F. W. Walther, St. Louis: CPH, c. 2006., pp. 591-593 [Bracketed words by Pastor Travis].