

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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New Year's Eve, December 31, 2007

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Hymns: 110 (115:6) 329, 118, 120:3

Lessons: Deuteronomy 32:1-7; Hebrews 10:35-39; Matthew 10:26b-33

Text: Luke 13:1-9

Sermon by Pastor M. H. Eibs

In the name of Jesus, dear friends,

The turn of the year is a time for reflecting upon the past and looking to the future. We reflect in a similar manner on various occasions, when we observe a birthday or some other anniversary. We think of the past and look to the future. A businessman takes inventory and figures out how the past year has been financially speaking, and he also makes plans for the New Year ahead.

It is also vitally important that we take a kind of spiritual inventory of ourselves. One good time to do this is when the old year passes into history and the New Year stretches out before us. Therefore, let us with God the Holy Spirit's guidance

TAKE THE TIME FOR A SPIRITUAL EXAMINATION.

We must ask ourselves:

- 1. Have we confessed our sinfulness?**
- 2. Have we made good use of our time of grace?**

“Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.” Some people came to Jesus to tell him of a terrible happening. Some people from Galilee were making a sacrifice in the temple at Jerusalem. While they were killing the animals to be sacrificed, Pilate, the Roman Governor, caused them to be murdered. Why this was done we are not told. Perhaps the Galileans were planning a riot or insurrection against the Roman government. For whatever reason, the group of people from Galilee was very suddenly killed so that their blood was mixed with the blood of the animals they were killing for sacrifice.

The people who came to Jesus to tell him of this had in their minds the thought that these Galileans must have been especially sinful because such a terrible thing happened to them. They perhaps thought that the Galileans must have been more sinful than other people. *“Jesus answered, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?’”*

In his answer to the people Jesus told them of another similar occurrence to illustrate his teaching. *“Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?”* Jesus then answered both questions in the same way, *“I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”* It seems to be a rather common idea in the minds of many people that when something terrible happens to a certain person, group, or family, that those people must have been especially sinful. Then they think the Lord caused the terrible thing to happen to them to punish them.

It is true that terrible accidents do happen, and some people suffer great affliction and sorrow. But there are two things we must guard against concerning these people. The one is we should not say that they had bad luck. Things do not happen by luck or chance. God rules and guides all things. So we do not wish other people good

luck, but we say to them, ***“May you be blessed by the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth,”*** Psalm 115:15. The other thing is: We should not try to determine what God’s purpose was in permitting such a terrible thing to happen.

God has his own purpose in guiding a person’s life in a certain way, either giving great blessings or permitting some evil thing to happen to them. In general we may say that all the evils of this world are the result of sin. If there were no sin in this world, no bad thing would ever happen. We know also that God punishes the unbelievers when they sin. ***“You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong. You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the LORD abhors,”*** Psalm 5:4-6. But when God permits bad things to happen in the lives of the believers, God is chastening or correcting them in a loving, fatherly way. ***“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons,”*** Hebrews 12:7. ***“God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness,”*** Hebrews 12:10. We should accept the fact that God’s ways of dealing with us are always just and right. We dare not find fault with God’s ways. David wrote, ***“As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless,”*** Psalm 18:30.

When we hear of something bad happening to a certain person, and then immediately point the finger at him and accuse him of being more sinful than others, that is self-righteousness. The devil tempts us to think of ourselves as being a little better than others are. When we hear the Law preached, it is a common tendency to apply it to the person in the next pew, and not to ourselves.

This we must guard against as we examine ourselves at this time. We should ask ourselves whether we have confessed our sinfulness. We should be concerned about our sins, not other people’s sins. Are we sincerely sorry for the sinful things we have done? We must acknowledge with a sincere heart that we have broken God’s commandments in our thoughts, words, and deeds. Therefore, at the turning of the year we should plead with the psalmist, ***“Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you,”*** Psalm 143:2. Unless we repent of our sins, there is no forgiveness for us, but only eternal destruction of body and soul in hell. ***“Whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him,”*** John 3:36b.

There is another question we must ask ourselves as we make a spiritual examination of ourselves: **Have we made good use of our time of grace?**

2.

This question is prompted by the parable Jesus told, ***“A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”*** Jesus teaches a lesson in this parable about all that claim the name Christian. God is the one who owns the vineyard, and we are the trees in the vineyard. The fruit of the vineyard represents the God-pleasing fruits of faith as believers in Christ. God expects fruits of faith from us. Jesus gave himself for us ***“to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good,”*** Titus 2:14. If God sees that we do not live Christian lives producing the fruits of faith in godly living, he justly gives the command, ***“Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?”*** We do not deserve to be in God’s vineyard in the first place. It is only by God’s grace for Jesus’ sake that we are believers in Christ. And Jesus, our only Mediator, pleads for us when we sin, interceding before our heavenly Father. ***“There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men,”*** 1 Timothy 2:5-6. When the vinedresser, Jesus Christ, intercedes for us, the heavenly Father extends the time of grace for us. He then looks for improvement in our spiritual life during that time of grace. If we then still produce no fruits of faith, we can expect that God

will cast us out of his kingdom. No fruits of faith is evidence of no faith in Jesus. ***“Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them,”*** Matthew 7:19-20. Jesus said to his disciples, ***“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing,”*** John 15:5. This teaches us that we must abide in Jesus in true faith, trusting in him for salvation. We should ask ourselves, have I in the past year put all my trust in Jesus Christ? Have I believed on him as my Sin-bearer who atoned for all my wrongs? Such faith is produced in the heart only by the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel, the means of grace. ***“Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ,”*** Romans 10:17. So we should also ask ourselves, have I faithfully made use of the means of grace, the Gospel in word and sacrament? Have I used the Word of God in private reading and study? Have I used it in family devotions? Have I learned it in Bible Class? Have I gone to the Lord’s Table and received the Sacrament of the Altar often and regularly? If we have to answer no to some of these questions, our faith is without doubt not as strong as it should be.

Have we given evidence of a Christian life in sanctified living? Have we offended someone by causing him or her to stumble in their faith by sins we have committed? Have we satisfied the lusts of our sinful flesh at places of sinful amusements? What are our plans for the New Year? Will we seek to get as much out of this world in money, worldly goods, and sinful pleasures as we can? Or will we do as Paul says? ***“Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God,”*** 2 Corinthians 7:1.

After considering all these questions in our spiritual examination, we certainly see that we have great need for Jesus to intercede for us. Jesus Christ ***“is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us,”*** Romans 8:34. On the cross Jesus prayed, ***“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,”*** Luke 23:34. John wrote, ***“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world,”*** 1 John 2:1-2. The heavenly Father will hear the intercession of his Son on our behalf and will extend the time of grace for us so that we may repent and be saved.

In this New Year that lies ahead, will we be like a barren tree or a fruitful tree in the Lord’s vineyard? The answer depends on how we make use of the time of grace that the Lord still gives us. Let us make full use of the Word and Sacrament in the New Year. Then we will receive help, comfort and strength in time of need. In time of trouble remember what God says, ***“call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me,”*** Psalm 50:15. When the Lord chastens us with sickness or sorrow, remember the Lord’s Word, ***“the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son,”*** Hebrews 12:6. In the uncertain days that lie ahead, in all the problems of our daily life, seek the guidance of God’s Word and remember, ***“we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose,”*** Romans 8:28. When our work in the church seems difficult, let us remember Paul’s confidence, ***“I can do everything through him who gives me strength,”*** Philippians 4:13. At all times, let us put our trust in Jesus our Savior and strive with our whole life to serve him. Amen.