

LD 25 Sacraments and the Word

Ps. 84: 1, 4, 5

Ps. 62: 1, 4

Ps. 105: 3, 4

Hymn 49: 1

Ps. 25: 2, 7

Scripture reading: 1 Peter 1:22 - 2:3

Text: LD 25

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

There was a farmer who did not plough his land, did not fertilise the soil and did not sow any seed. When people asked the farmer why he is doing nothing, he replied: "I am not able to make the wheat grow, and I am not able to produce the fruit, it is only God who can give life and growth, therefore I leave it in His hands that He may grant me a harvest!"

After doing nothing for many months it became harvest time, and so that foolish farmer prayed and asked that the Lord may grant him a good harvest. But, of course, there was nothing. Even a child could tell him that he should use the means which God has provided.

Brothers and sisters, it is true that only God can give growth and fruit, yet the farmer has to work. He has to plough the field, he has to work manure into the ground to make it fertile, and he has to sow the seed. He also has to get rid of the weeds and he has to irrigate the land, or else there will be no harvest.

Dear congregation, the same applies to our spiritual life. It is God who gives faith through the working of His Spirit. It is He that gives growth and fruit in our spiritual life. But He will not give it to us without the means of grace. He will not give it to us

without the instruction of His word. If someone refuses to use the means of grace, there will be no fruit and no harvest.

This afternoon we will note the means by which God gives us faith, as well as the means by which He sustains and increases our faith.

I preach the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to you with the theme:

Use the means of God's grace

We will note:

1. That God's word is the instrument by which the Holy Spirit works faith in us
2. The meaning of the sacraments

In the first place we note that...

God's word is the instrument by which the Holy Spirit works faith in us

We receive Christ and all His riches only through faith. But, where does this faith come from? The Holy Spirit works it in our hearts through the preaching of the Word and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments.

Before we look at the instruments which the Holy Spirit uses, we have to know that faith is indeed a gift of God. Faith is a divine work of the Holy Spirit in us. It is not of us. We are not of ourselves able to believe. By nature we are born spiritually dead. And so the apostle Paul tells us:

“...by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God...” - Eph.2:8.

And God does not give faith to everyone, but to His elect only.

However, the Holy Spirit does not work faith in us without means. Scripture calls the preaching of God's Word the seed of regeneration. This afternoon we read from 1 Peter 1 where the apostle says that we have been...

“...born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever...Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you” - verse 23, 25.

Brothers and sisters, the word which is preached to us is the seed by which we receive new life. God's word is the incorruptible seed which the Spirit plants in our hearts. By the seed of His word God begets us, and gives us life.

We find the same thing when Paul says that it pleased God to save people through the preaching of the gospel - 1 Cor. 1:21. Or when He says in Rom. 10:17 that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. Faith is through the word of God. In no other way will you receive faith. In no other way will the Spirit give you life.

The Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts only through the preaching and instruction of God's word. It is especially here in the worship service that the Holy Spirit generates faith in our heart through the preaching of the gospel.

But the word of God is not only the means by which the Spirit gives us faith once, it is also the means by which the Spirit makes our faith to grow and to increase. After the apostle Peter said that we receive life through the preaching of the Word, he also continues and says:

“...as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby” - 1 Peter 2:2.

God's word is not only the seed of life but also the spiritual food for our souls; and there is no other way for us to grow in faith than to eat God's word, to drink it like

milk, and as we grow in knowledge and discernment to eat also the solid food of His word in order to grow to spiritual maturity.

The word of God is both the seed of which we were born, and the milk by which we continue to grow.

Do you long to be filled with the Holy Spirit, do you long for the Spirit to work powerfully in you? You don't have to look for strange experiences that happen in a strange way. You don't have to look for wonders and signs. Here, in the worship service, through the preaching of the gospel the Spirit is working in you. The worship service is the workplace of the Holy Spirit. The instrument, the tool, by which He works in us, is God's word. And He will not work in you without this tool.

The Spirit does not use this instrument in a hidden place, but openly in the gathering of the congregation. All are welcome to hear the words of the Spirit.

Whoever stays away from the worship service cuts himself off from the work of the Spirit. Don't refuse the work of the Spirit by neglecting your private devotions and your family devotions, the catechism classes and the Bible studies. For it is by hearing the word, receiving its instruction, and by meditating on it, that the Spirit will powerfully renew your life. Whoever neglects to come to the divine service where God's word is preached, and whoever neglects doing Bible studies and neglects to meditate on God's word, cuts himself off from the work of the Holy Spirit. If anyone does not feed his soul with God's word, he is like that foolish farmer who desires a harvest without ploughing or sowing.

God gives us faith through His Spirit. That is grace alone. But He gives it to you in a sermon. It pleased God to save us and to feed us by the preaching and instruction of His word.

Do you want to be united to Christ and to grow in union with Him? Do you want to share in all His riches? Come to the workshop of the Holy Spirit. Here, through the preaching of the gospel God will give you the life which is only in Christ, and here He will feed you with Christ that you may grow in Him and bear fruit. Here God wants to strengthen our weak faith which is attacked so fiercely every day.

Come, let us gather to hear the word of God that the Spirit may unite us more and more to Christ, and that we may grow in the grace which we once received and continue to the end, growing in maturity, increasingly bearing fruit, that we may indeed see a great harvest.

If the preaching of God's word is the instrument by which the Spirit works faith in Christ and union with Christ, then we have to examine ourselves whether this is our inclination when we come to the worship service, or when we open the Bible. Do you come with the expectation that the Spirit will work powerfully in you to unite you to Christ, and to raise you to a new life in Christ, with the same power with which He raises the dead? Do you come because your soul longs for God? Do you still experience that the preaching of God's word is a power of God unto salvation? Or do you come without any expectation? Has it all become to you nothing more than a tradition?

No, let us eagerly use the means of God's grace, and use it prayerfully. Don't cut yourself off from the working of the Holy Spirit, and then expect that there will be any harvest. Use the means faithfully, and prayerfully, and trust God for the harvest.

In the second place we note...

The meaning of the sacraments

The Lord gave us two sacraments. In the OT it was circumcision and the Passover. In the New Testament it is baptism and the Lord's Supper. It has been given as signs and seals of the covenant of grace.

Now, what is the promise of the covenant? God said to Abraham:

“I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you” (Gen. 17:7).

That is the summary of the covenant promise: I will be your God and the God of your children.

This promise is repeated throughout the Old Testament, and also throughout the whole New Testament. Finally we find the same promise back in the book of Revelation:

“...Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God” - Rev.21: 3

And again:

“He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son” - Rev.21: 7

All the heavenly blessings are summarised in this one promise. If God is our God, then we received everything.

Now, this promise of the covenant is fulfilled only in Christ. Through Christ we are reconciled to God. Through Him God becomes our God. **He** is Immanuel - God with us.

This is the promise of the covenant, and in the NT this same promise is called the gospel. Through Christ we are reconciled to God. Through Him God becomes our God.

Now, the sacraments are signs and seals of this gospel. We read for example that the apostle Paul says that Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal - Rom.4:11. He speaks of circumcision as a sign and a seal.

It is a sign of the covenant, and it seals the promise of the covenant.

As a sign it is a picture of the whole gospel. The whole gospel is portrayed in the sacraments. The essence of the gospel is the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus on the cross whereby we are washed from our sins and reconciled to God.

Thus the catechism also asks:

“Are both the Word and the sacraments then intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?”

And then the answer:

“Yes, indeed. The Holy Spirit teaches us in the gospel and assures us by the sacraments that our entire salvation rests on Christ’s one sacrifice for us on the cross”.

When we see the sacraments, it is signs that remind us of God’s covenant promises. It reminds us of the gospel of salvation in Christ.

But, it is not only signs, it is also seals, whereby the promise is visibly guaranteed and sealed to us.

When you were baptised into the name of the Father, God the Father testified and sealed to you that He has established an eternal covenant with you. He has adopted you as His child and as heir of all the heavenly riches.

When you were baptised into the Name of the Son, God the Son promised you that He washes you in His blood from all your sins and unites you with Him in His death and resurrection. Thus you were freed from your sins and accounted righteous before God.

And when you were baptised into the Name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assured you by the sacrament that He will dwell in you and make you a living member of Christ, imparting to you what you have in Christ, namely, the cleansing from your sins and the daily renewal of your live, until you shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God’s elect in life eternal.

This heavenly promise is given in absolute terms and very strongly emphasised. Yes, it was sealed to you. What then if someone who received baptism will not be gathered with the elect in eternal life? Was the promise then truly made to him? Yes, it was truly given and sealed to him, even when he rejects it in unbelief. The covenant still stands, even when disobedient children reject God's promise and break the covenant. And therefore, for those who reject the promise in unbelief, the curse of the covenant will follow.

We have to discern between election and covenant. God's gracious election is without any condition. He did not elect us because he foresaw that we would believe, or because he found anything good in us. We were in all respects unworthy, and He elected us without any condition out of mere grace alone according to the good pleasure of His will. That is election unto eternal life, but that is not the covenant.

The promise of the covenant will not be fulfilled in your life if you reject it in unbelief. The promise will be fulfilled in your life only through faith. And you will taste the fruit of God's grace only in the way of obedience.

The covenant indeed contains two parts: a promise and an obligation. And so we are called and obliged by the covenant to a new obedience. The promise is given to us with the call to repent and believe. The covenant asks for the response of faith.

The promise is truly given and sealed to us, but it will be fulfilled in our lives only through faith, and it will be experienced and enjoyed only in the way of obedience.

When someone rejects the promise in unbelief, then he is still in the covenant, and the covenant still applies to him, however, he will not receive the fulfilment of the blessings, but the fulfilment of the curse in all its bitterness.

Brothers and sisters, the sacraments are not a sign and a seal that you have eternal life. It does not seal your election. It is a sign and a seal that God has made His covenant with you, the promise of the gospel is given to you, sealed to you, with the call to repent and believe.

Now we see the relation between the Word and sacraments. The sacraments do not add anything to the gospel. The sacraments seal to us only that which we have in the gospel - nothing more, nothing less. And without the word the sacraments

are meaningless. Imagine a missionary that goes out in the field baptising people without preaching the gospel. Will that baptism benefit them? No, not at all!

We may compare the sacraments to a signet ring. If a king would write a letter to you appointing you as heir of all his possessions, he will take His signet ring from His finger and seal the letter. Then the letter will bear the sign and the seal of the king. When you see the seal you will be all the more certain that the king has indeed promised you such a wealth. The seal guarantees the content of the letter. But if the same seal is placed on a blank piece of paper, what will it mean to you? Nothing! So are the sacraments without the word meaningless.

Dear congregation, God has not given us a blank piece of paper. He has given us the whole Bible as the book of the covenant, the book of His promise. And He has sealed the content to each one of us personally by giving us the sacraments. *That* He has not given to the world, but only to those whom He calls out of the world.

Now we see the relation between word and sacrament. The two belongs together - and in this order that the sacraments follow the word. We do not receive faith through the sacraments, but through the word *only*, and afterwards our faith is strengthened by the sacraments.

The sacraments have no magic power. The grace of God does not flow into us automatically as we use the sacraments, but the sacraments do strengthen our faith when we use it not out of superstition, but trusting in Christ who is preached to us in the gospel and sealed to us in the sacraments.

Through the preaching of the gospel the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts, and the sacraments are added to strengthen our faith.

If someone refuses to listen to the preaching of the gospel, the sacraments will serve only to make his condemnation heavier.

The covenant, of which the sacraments are signs and seals, calls and obliges us to faith and repentance. Therefore parents are obliged to educate their children in the covenant as they grow up. Without the instruction in the covenant, without the

instruction of the gospel, a child's baptism will work no faith. Then such a child will become guilty of breaking the covenant and receive the curse of the covenant.

For that reason it is so important that with every baptism and with every Lord Supper, and with every opportunity in between, the gospel is preached, because the sacraments itself is not the first cause of our faith, but only strengthens our faith which is given to us through the preaching of Christ.

Yes, it is necessary to spell this out, for we see in the history of the church how the sacraments were very often used out of superstition, and the result was devastating. We may think of the struggle that arose around the covenant and baptism because of the error of presumptive regeneration, or we may think of the Roman Mass. Without the sound preaching of the Word, the sacraments become idolatry.

For us, however, who put our trust only in Christ, the sacraments do strengthen our faith. And as such we receive them thankfully from the Lord's hand.

Everything that the gospel promises and commands us is also portrayed in the sacraments. The sacraments are the gospel in a nutshell.

Eternal life for everyone who believes and obeys, but judgment and curse for everyone who do not believe and repent!

Dear brothers and sisters, if you know your own sin before God, flee to Christ, for in Him we have complete forgiveness of all our sins. Christ has died on the cross for *our* sins. He reconciled us to God. Hear the gospel, and see the gospel. The punishment for our sins was on Him, and by His stripes we are healed.

Amen.