

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 29, 2013

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 294, 377:8-9, 284, 296, 49.

Lessons: Jeremiah 23: 23-32, 1 Corinthians 3:11-16, Matthew 24: 35-44.

Sermon Text: Hebrews 4:12-14.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

In the past few weeks you've heard about God's rest. You've heard that those who do not believe will never enter God's rest. You've heard that those who believe WILL enter and receive God's rest.

So the question might have occurred to you – how do you know – how will you know who are believers and who don't believe? Well, the answer is that we don't know. And we aren't supposed to know for that is God's to know and reveal at the right time – Judgment Day when all shall be revealed. We read in 1 Corinthians 3:13: "[every man's] *work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.*" Peter tells us: "*But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*" (1 Peter 4:13)

Instead of wondering who will be saved and who won't, we are to hold firmly to our faith and to fix our eyes on Jesus our High Priest, because "*we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, [so] let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.*" (Hebrews 4:16)

Today, as we look at this text, we should concern ourselves about our own faith. Now this in no way minimizes or negates our command to "*Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation*" (Mark 16:15) but that is a subject for another sermon.

God knows what is in the hearts of everyone, including us. "*Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.*" (Hebrews 4:11)

Today we are reminded that

GOD'S REST COMES TO THOSE WHO BELIEVE HIS HOLY WORD

- 1. The rest God promises.**
- 2. God's Word examines, measures and weighs all mankind.**
- 3. We must give account to God.**

We want to enter God's rest. That's one significant reason why you are here, to hear God's Word which assures penitent sinners of the forgiveness of sins. Many people want to enter God's rest, but don't know or believe what God says about how to enter into God's eternal rest.

In the Old Testament, God used the picture of rest on the Sabbath day, that is, physical rest on the seventh day of the week, the Sabbath day, the day whose name means "rest".

For us in the New Testament the picture is even clearer. Those Sabbath days were, as Colossians 2:17 points out "*a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*"

In Christ shadow has become reality. Through his death and resurrection the way to God's eternal rest is fully completed and God's rest is opened wide. What we now need are not Old Testament Sabbath days, but a faith in Christ that will hold firmly to God's promises and be refreshed by hearing and studying God's promises in his Word.

Such glorious rest the believer tastes now in part and wants to taste in heaven fully and forever. We need more than just a good beginning, more than outward allegiance to Christianity, more than mere lip service to his

Word. We must constantly be diligent so that we do not end up like disobeying and unbelieving Israel in the desert.

Those who believe will be recipients of God's promised rest. We begin to know that rest in this life, by the peace of sins forgiven that comes from Jesus' death on the cross for us. But the full and complete rest, the true rest for our souls, is in heaven. When we by faith enter into that ultimate rest that Jesus has won for us, there will be no more pain or suffering or worry. We will be at home with God. We enter that rest through faith in Christ. We rest from our labors and trust in his labors. Jesus invites us to do just that when he says, "***Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.***" (Matthew 11:28-30)

Even now, we find rest for our souls, knowing that our salvation is secure in Christ. So how can one – anyone – know that he or she is headed in the right direction, and know that he or she will receive God's Rest?

Everyone will be examined and measured by the standard of God's Word. "***For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.***"

In previous verses this book of the Bible has forcefully set forth the fact that God grants rest to believers but denies it to unbelievers. Now he clearly reminds his readers that God's word can easily distinguish between believers and unbelievers. With the words "***Word of God***" he is not just referring to only one passage of Scripture or only to the Old Testament but also to all the New Testament Scriptures which those Jewish Christians had by that time

That Word was no dry encyclopedia filled with dusty facts. It was no mere human word which is spoken and then quickly evaporates into the air. It has qualities which should make them sit up and pay attention to it as the author shows by setting forth three pairs of thoughts.

The word of God is living and active is the first pair. It is a life changing force. It is alive, filled with the vitality of God himself and therefore indestructible and imperishable. It is also active. Despite what unbelievers and doubters claim, the Word of God is not outmoded, but always up-to-date and effective as God himself says in Isaiah 55:10-11: "***As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.***"

The second pair of thoughts tells us it is sharper than any double-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. The short sword carried by the Roman soldier was sharp and with its double edge could cut any direction. But God's word is far sharper. Its cutting edges can divide even the indivisible. It is difficult to make a distinction between soul and spirit. Who can tell where soul and spirit touch or divide? Yet God's word slices the two as easily as a sharp scissors slices through a piece of paper. With the incisiveness of a surgeon's knife it reveals what we are and what we are not.

Some of you may remember the old flat double-edged razor blade, not often used today. It was very sharp and it cut both ways. So is the Word of God, which makes a clear line of division between the old natural, sinful life of man and the new spiritual life of a man,

The Word penetrates to the core of our moral and spiritual life. In Ephesians 6:17 it is compared to a sword, too, where Christians are encouraged to "***Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.***"

With joints and marrow the author presents a slightly different thought. God's Word with its cutting edge figuratively lays bare the joints where the bones meet and even the bones themselves where the marrow is. So deeply the word penetrates into man's innermost being, exposing his most secret parts. The people who heard Peter's sermon on Pentecost knew about the penetrating action of this double-edged sword. "***When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'***" (Acts 2:37) We find the same kind of response to the Word of God when John the Baptist proclaimed God's Word.

The third pair of thoughts says it judges the thoughts and attitudes, the ideas of the heart. It discerns what is within us. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of God. The word of God is his eye to look into the hearts of men. With its piercing gaze it penetrates into the heart's deepest recesses and correctly judges the thoughts and attitudes it finds there. On the last day that word will also do the judging. In John 12:48 Jesus warned, ***"There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day."***

When the Word of God – especially the Law of God – is being proclaimed, the heart will be revealed, as we read in 1 Corinthians 14:25: ***"and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare."***

We must not only listen to the Word, we must also let it shape our lives, as James tells us: ***"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."*** (James 1:22)

The same thought is expressed in the second half of this pair. By shifting from God's word to the person of God himself, the author shows how closely connected the two are. Under God's discerning gaze no one can hide himself or his deeds. Everything is uncovered. That secret sin, that seemingly hidden temptation. That little speck of the decay of sin, that slow shifting away from God and his Word. Nothing and no one will be hidden from God's eyes. Nothing can be hidden from God. He knows about everyone everywhere.

The emphasis is continued in the next verse: ***"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."*** No created thing is unrevealed before him, but all things lie naked and exposed before his eyes with whom is our reckoning. We could think of a sacrificial animal which was cut open, exposing the interior to the inspection of the priest. The person who falsely believes that he is able to keep some transgression, some sinful condition hidden before the eyes of God and the penetrating power of his Word is deceiving himself. No man may forget for any length of time that there will be a final reckoning, at which time all the hypocrisy and deceit practiced by men will be exposed and laid bare in all its hideous nakedness. Knowing this, we Christians will certainly abstain from all attempts at deceiving the omniscient Lord and strive with all earnestness to enter into that rest which is prepared for all who believe.

Now comes the conclusion to which the author has been leading with the three pairs. He points to him to whom we must give account. God's Word brings life to us and eternity to our hearts. But if that Word is neglected or spurned the day will come when his Word will compel us to look into God's all-seeing eyes. To the unbeliever this thought warns him that God cannot be mocked without suffering the consequences. To the believer this thought warms him with the idea that God knows all his weaknesses and stands ready to provide in Christ all that is needed.

Thus for believer and for unbeliever we see the recurring theme of this chapter, ***"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."*** (Hebrews 4:7)

And the believer must especially remember God's words of comfort in 1 Peter 1:23: ***"For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God."*** The believer also rejoices with Paul: ***"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."*** (Romans 1:16)

It is comforting to realize that although God knows us intimately he still loves us. After all, he sent his one and only Son to suffer and die to redeem us from our sins. Jesus is our great high priest in heaven, through whom we can come to God with all our cares and troubles. ***"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess."*** Next week we will continue with that thought. So ***"Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."*** (Hebrews 4:16) Amen.