

Apart from the Means of Grace, we would remain spiritually blind, dead, and God's enemy. The hearing of the impenitent is closed; shut-off from listening to the Word of God, despising it for whatever excuse the sinful flesh can come up with. In conversion, however, God brings the Christian to new life. In conversion, what was once dead now is living. Conversion is literally a resurrection of the soul. This is a far more spectacular miracle than anything we could possibly ever see with our eyes on earth. If we actually believed as we confess in the Creed that, "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith", then we could not help but burst forth in praise for what the Lord has done for each one of us! Faith is a miracle; a wondrous work of God!

In the Collect today we prayed: "Help us steadfastly to live in this life according to Your *promises* and finally attain Your heavenly glory." While at other times we ask the Lord to help us live according to all of His Word, both the Law and the Gospel to use the common distinction you're familiar with, today we specifically petitioned our Heavenly Father to help us live according to His promises.

All the promises God makes to us He keeps. Through the Word faith actually comes. Through the waters of Baptism, God actually makes us His child, the promise received by faith. In the Lord's Supper, Christ through the hands of the pastor distributes not only the bread and wine, but also His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. Petitioning God to help us live according to His promises is asking God, "Help us live in a way that demonstrates we *believe* all Your promises!" For the person who believes they are redeemed *by* the blood of Christ desires to live *for* Him! When we catch ourselves not desiring to live according to His Word, that is a clear cut call for us to repent.

When we struggle to desire to do what we know God has called us to do, it is a demonstration of our unbelief. When we know what we're supposed to do, and we fail to do it, it's a result of our own weakness. We fail to let God's love and promises have their way with us. So what does the Christian do? We repent. We repent, and ask the Lord for His grace to help us do better. And what does Christ do? He speaks His Word, "*Ephphatha*, that is, be opened." He opens our hearing to the forgiveness of sins, received by His grace through faith alone.

Thus the sanctification process – God making us holy – is on-going. We grow, we fail, we confess, we receive Absolution, we grow, fail, etc. The Christian life will almost always feel like a two steps forward and one step back ordeal. And sometimes, from our perspective it may even seem one step forward and two or three steps back. In those instances, we are usually growing in our understanding of the depth of our sinful nature. Rest assured. Confess and receive Absolution. Take great comfort in knowing that Christ unconditionally continues to heal you through the Word and Sacrament. Christ alone is strengthening you to speak and do rightly, just like the deaf and mute man.

In this sense, "orthodoxy" doesn't happen overnight. You will continue to grow in your praise of God your whole life long because God is faithful. He is strengthening you in body and soul until life everlasting. No one can snatch you from His hand (**Jn 10:29**).

When you believe the Gospel that Jesus died for you for the forgiveness of sins, your willingness to live according to God's promises will never be perfect on this side of glory. So don't expect it. And don't despair over it. Our "liberty of spirit is burdened with great weakness, as St. Paul complains about himself in **Romans 7:15** ("For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate") and **Galatians 5:17** ("For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh"). Nevertheless, for the sake of the Lord Christ, the Lord does not charge this weakness to His elect, as it is written, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus", **Romans 8:1** (FC IV, 13-14).

Take comfort. You have heard God's Word. God has opened your hearing and given you faith through it. "Repent and believe the Good News" (**Mk 1:15**). You are forgiven. You are in Christ Jesus. In Jesus' name, Amen.