

*But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.<sup>12</sup> Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.<sup>13</sup> In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you<sup>14</sup> to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ,<sup>15</sup> which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords,<sup>16</sup> who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen. (1 Timothy 6:11-16)*

### What is a Good Confession?

Confirmation day is all about confession. Not the confession of our sins; the confession of our faith. It's not enough that I say these young people are ready to be confirmed. It's not enough for me to show you their test grades or the results of the examination we conducted yesterday. Being a Christian is about more than passing a test. And faith is not something that I can see in the hearts of these young people. For us to accept them as communicant members, for us to extend to them the privilege of coming to the Lord's Supper, they need to speak for themselves. Confirmation Day is a day in which we give these young people the opportunity to publicly declare their faith in Christ and their conviction that the teachings of the Lutheran Church are the very teachings of Scripture. When we do that, we stand in good company. For as long as the Christian Church has existed, it has asked its members to give a public confession on the day they're welcomed to communion. Today, we want these young people to give a good confession of their faith. But what does that mean? That's the key question for our meditation this morning. It's something we all want these young people to understand. And it's something that all of us who have stood where they will stand want to remember. **What is a good confession?**

#### I.

**It's a confession of faith in Christ.** That's what St. Paul reminded Timothy of. He said, **"Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses."** Timothy made a public confession of faith – perhaps on a day very much like this one. We Christians don't hide our faith. We make it a real and public thing and it's important that we have a day like today in which these young people – you young people – have the opportunity to tell the world that you are indeed one with us in faith.

And we do want that confession to be a good confession. A poor confession would be one that waffles about what you believe. It would let people to walk away uncertain about what you believe and what you're committed to. Paul gives us the example of a good confession this morning: the confession that Jesus made when he stood before Pontius Pilate. You all know the story. In the middle of the night on Maundy Thursday, Judas Iscariot led a company of temple guards and Roman soldiers to the Garden of Gethsemane, because he knew Jesus would be there. They arrested him, bound him and dragged him off to see the high priest and the Jewish ruling council. After a whole series of trumped up charges and hearings, they condemned him to die. But under Roman law, they could not execute him. So they beat him and sent him to Pilate, the Roman procurator who ruled in Jerusalem.

From a human perspective, Pilate held Jesus' life in his hands. So what did Jesus do when his life depended on what he said? Did he try to weasel out of the charges? Did he look for a legal strategy to beat the charges? Or did he simply deny who he was because it would be better to live and confess another day than die? No. Jesus told Pilate that he was the king of the Jews, but that his kingdom was not of this world. He told him that he was the Son of God and that everyone on the side of truth listened to him. The Lord made a good confession of who he was and what he came here to do.

We have come today to hear a confession of who Jesus is and what he came to do. That confession has consequences in this life. To claim to belong to the Lord means to turn our backs on the false ideas of this world we live in. It means separating ourselves from what most people think and believe and want out of life. That's never an easy thing for us to do. The fact that it's hard for us to turn our backs on the society we live in

shows our sin. The fact that it's hard to think like God thinks shows that our hearts are not pure. To confess Jesus as our Savior, we must understand that we need a Savior. We were born sinners. Every one of us sins every single day. Every time we do what we want to do instead of what God tells us to do, we sin. If we're honest, we all have to admit that in our words and actions, we have sinned against God over and over again.

But our sin does not begin in what we do or say. It begins in our hearts. It begins in what we feel and in what we think. God judges the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts. When we're bored with what God says, when we don't believe what his word tells us, when we want something that isn't ours, when we're discontented and unsatisfied and rebellious, we sin, even if we never do or say anything that shows it. The truth is, the Bible teaches that all we say and do, even our best efforts, and all that we think and feel, even when we're trying our hardest, all of it is corrupted by sin.

All that sin deserves hell. A good confession of Christ begins by acknowledging that we're sinners who deserve hell. But that's only the beginning. Every good confession clings to Christ who saved us from our sins. It takes hold of the eternal life that Jesus won for us by making that good confession before Pontius Pilate. My friends, Jesus was the Son of God. Don't you think he could've argued his way out of dying that day, if he had wanted to? Don't you think he could've ripped apart the ropes that held him? Don't you think he could've sent Pilate and the Jewish leaders and the guards and soldiers straight to hell? Of course he could've. He was God.

So why didn't he? Because already then, he knew these eight young people and all the rest of us who are here this morning. And he wanted us to have a Savior that we could trust in. He knew that if he didn't go to the cross, every human being who has ever lived would spend eternity in hell. So he died to pay for all those words and actions that rebel against God. He died to pay for these sinful hearts and the evil thoughts and attitudes that come out of them. He died and he paid for all the sins that every sinner has ever committed. He died and paid for you and for me.

And then he rose and declared that our sin is gone forever. Then he sent that gospel message out into all the world. And the most recent example of that gospel doing its work was the two years that we spent together studying what God says. The faith that God gave you when you were baptized was strengthened and clarified during those two years. So today, you can stand here and confess that your sins were paid for by Jesus and that you will live with him forever. Your confession today will be good because it will focus on him.

## II.

Very soon now, we'll hear that confession. But our members and guests here this morning may notice that the confession is prewritten. It's not in their own words. Rather, I'll ask them questions and expect specific answers. And someone might ask if that really is good enough. Well, if these young people just go through the motions, if they stand up here and say something that they don't believe, they will be mocking God. So, how will we know if their confession is sincere? Well, we won't, not for sure. Even if I let them write their own confession, there's no way to know for sure if they meant it. Only God can look into our hearts. But he does give us one test that is reasonably certain in this life. Jesus tells us to look at the fruits of faith. Usually, where we can see what look like fruits of faith, we've found a believer. Always when there are no fruits of faith, when a person refuses to repent of their sins and work to change, then there is no faith. So our confession is not just what we say. It's how we live. That helps us to answer the question: **what is a good confession? It's a confession which is reflected in your life.**

St. Paul told Timothy, **"But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness."** The "all this" that we're supposed to flee from is the love of money. God tells all of us to flee from one of the defining characteristics of modern American society. Instead, we're supposed to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Notice that those words are attitudes as well as actions. They're the way we do what we do. Gentleness and endurance are vastly different from the aggressive, self-promoting person our society admires. Our society pushes pride in yourself, love for yourself, taking care of yourself. But God tells us to live for him – to be godly and righteous and trusting, and then to love, to endure all hardships patiently, to be gentle in our dealings with all people, even if that slows us down and causes us to miss out on what we want and what we hope for.

Then Paul tells us to fight the good fight of faith. What an odd contrast! War is not gentle. We are at war with the powers of sin and with our sinful natures. Yet the way we fight is not by shouting others down, it's not by crushing or defeating or arguing better. We triumph by trusting in the Lord. We conquer by being

gentle when the devil wants us to rage, by being patient when the devil tells us we have every right to lose our temper and vent our feelings, by showing love when we think we deserve a little payback.

All our lives we Christians are to fight that good fight of faith. That means that every day that we live here, we're to live as Christ lived. We're to sacrifice ourselves for the benefit of others. We're to confess that we trust in God to overcome all that this life dishes out by putting ourselves at a disadvantage relative to the rest of the world. We're to confess that what we can't see – God who lives in unapproachable light – is the only one that matters. And we confess that by living in love for God and for each other.

What an impossible standard! There's only one way we can live up to it: by the power of God. Every one of us is a sinner. The more I tell you what a Christian life is supposed to look like, the more guilty you're going to feel because you don't live that way. But the gospel tells us that Jesus took all our guilt away. When we hear that message again, we feel forgiven and free and joyful in Christ. In that great act of God taking our guilt away we find the power to live for Christ.

Jesus is coming back to take us home to be with him forever. He has already overcome our weakness and sin. He has already paid for it and forgiven it. Now he gives us the power to follow him all the days of our life. Now, we won't ever be perfect in this life. Even within what's possible for sinners here, these young people have a lot of growing to do in their faith – as do we all. God willing, they're going to have decades of serving the Lord here before they see him face to face. They – you – are going to need God's power every single day of that time. There's only one way for you to get it: you have to be here. You have to come and hear the message that Jesus loved you and died for you and rose to give you life. You have to come and take communion where you will receive the real body and blood of Christ in and with and under the bread and wine to strengthen your faith. You need to confess your sin and then hear God announce that you are forgiven. You need to have your guilt and your weakness washed away by Jesus.

His promise is that he will work in you through that gospel. In just a moment, I'm going to ask you confirmands a series of questions. You've already seen them, but I want to call your attention to the second last question: "Do you intend to continue steadfast in this teaching and to endure all things, even death, rather than fall away from it?" That's the question before you today. You will confess your faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and then you will promise to follow him. But note how you will answer: "Yes, and I ask God to help me." You can't do it by yourself. Christ alone gives you the power to keep the promise you will make – to fulfill the vow to be faithful to the teachings of God's Word. Make your good confession today. Then make your solemn vow in the sight of God. And then come and hear his word and take communion regularly for the rest of your life so that God works in you to keep that promise. Amen.