

### ***Holy People, Higher Standards***

In the name of him in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins, dear friends in Christ: “By grace you have been saved through faith—and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast.” I’ll bet most of you have that passage memorized. And well you should because it is the central teaching of the Holy Scripture. Salvation is a gift of God that he grants through faith in the Lord Jesus who suffered and died on the cross as the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the whole world. We are richly blessed to be members of a church where this most important teaching is kept in the center and emphasized and re-emphasized week after week: It’s what Christ did for you, not what you do for yourself. It’s trusting in him, not trusting in your own wits, abilities, or achievements. It’s faith in him, not your works. Faith not works. *Faith* not *works* ... and never do we want to confuse them, mix them, blend them, add them together or change them around. To do so in any way is the path to false doctrine, to heresy, and ultimately to eternal ruin. Faith and works are poles apart and we need to keep them that way.

We know that. And maybe it’s because we know that so well and emphasize it so much that sometimes we forget that true and living faith in Christ always produces good works. Though they are poles apart, they are intimately linked together. Good, commendable, and worthy works naturally flow from trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation – just as sure as the rumble of thunder follows a flash of lightening. And that’s a good analogy because it’s the lightening that causes the thunder, not the other way around. In a similar way saving faith produces good works. But you can’t reverse it: good works are never the cause of salvation. But on the other hand, if you claim to have saving faith and aren’t producing good works ... well, that’s like a flash of light without the thunder – whatever it was that lit things up, it wasn’t really lightening. This is why St. James wrote that the kind of faith that fails to produce good works is a faith that is dead.

And this is why too that St. Paul in this morning’s Epistle lesson, which is the opening part of his letter to the Christian church at Colossae, commends the members there first for their faith in Jesus Christ and secondly for the love that they are displaying for one another and for their fellow Christians throughout the world. Paul, writing to them from Rome, says that we’ve heard what wonderful things are going on there among you. We’re thrilled about it! And we’re praying that your spiritual wisdom and understanding (that is, your faith) and your walk with the Lord and the fruit you bear (that is, your works) will be made complete. Now Paul we know is the Bible’s great champion and most insistent teacher of the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone without the works of the law. He’s practically fanatical about it—as well he should be: it’s the truth upon which the Church stands or falls – and yet here he is praising a group of Christians for their faith and their works, and he’s exhorting them to continue to grow in both. He expects that people who profess the Christian faith should actually live like Christians – that is, according to a higher standard.

And in this morning’s Old Testament lesson, the Lord is saying the same thing to Moses. He tells Moses to say to the Israelites, “I am the Lord your God” – that is, “I’m the God who just saved you from a life of endless misery as slaves in Egypt, and now I’m taking you to Canaan, the land overflowing with milk and honey. I’m going to give you as your inheritance. Your part in all that? Trust me to take care of it.” We recognize that as salvation by grace through faith. But then he goes on, “And now, in light of all this that I am doing for you, here’s how I want you to conduct yourselves ...” What follows are a list of standards by which he wants his people to live. They were to be the mark of a community shaped by faith in the One True God who saved his people. They were to be what made them stand out from among the other peoples around them.

And that’s why he says, “Don’t be like the Egyptians. Don’t do the sorts of things they do. And I don’t want you to live like the Canaanites either. Don’t adopt their customs or follow in their ways.” The Lord wanted his people to be noticeably different than their neighbors. Obviously, he didn’t want his people to practice the false religions of these pagan peoples – but more than that, he didn’t want them to imitate their personal behaviors. The Egyptians were a proud people. The pursuit of glory and wealth is what drove them. They were also rather xenophobic; that is, they didn’t much care for strangers. They saw foreigners as people to

conquer and put to work for their own advantage. The Canaanites on the other hand were a very immoral people. Their culture was entirely sex-saturated. And here we see the Lord telling his people to separate themselves from such ways of life. He's saying to them, "I've called you out of bondage. I've saved you. I've placed my holy name upon you. And now you represent me, the Lord God, to the world. Live in a way that reflects what you are: a holy people with a higher standard."

What follows are the specifics. And if you look at the way the Old Testament reading was cut and spliced, you'll see that most of Leviticus chapter 18 is missing. That's a long section that deals with sexual purity. It includes such things as the prohibited degrees of marriage; that is, who can't marry whom because of blood relations and the like, and also prohibitions against adultery, homosexuality, and other forms of inappropriate sexual behavior. The Lord wanted his people to be chaste and pure in their bodies, and to confine their sexual expression to marriage as he intended.

Then we get to the section we heard today. First farmers were not to harvest the edges or corners of their fields, nor were they allowed to glean their fields after harvesting—that is, they weren't to go back and pick up whatever was missed when the harvesters went through the first time. The same was true of vineyards and fruit orchards. Whatever produce was left behind after the first picking was to be for the poor and destitute. People without means or property could follow right after the harvesters and collect the food they needed to survive. In this way those with means were to provide for the poor. And it's a rather clever way to do it because it largely eliminates the need for begging and the sense of welfare entitlement that tends to set in among those without means. Every society has haves and have-nots, it's unavoidable; but in Israel even the have-nots were expected to work to sustain themselves – and gleaning is a lot of work with little return—but it's enough to live on.

The edges of the fields and orchards were to be left unharvested for the benefit of travelers. Especially if your property came up against a public path or highway you were to leave what grew there untouched. Remember this was an age without Casey stations for travelers to use for their convenience. And the Land of Israel was strategically located at the crossroads of several major trading routes. The Lord wanted his people to be mindful of these strangers passing through their land and think about their needs. And he wanted those passing through to say, "You know, these Israelites are a strange lot. They're very unselfish. They take care of the poor and needy among them; why they even go so far as to leave out free food for strangers."

And that's not all the Lord wanted his people to be known for. What follows are a series of instructions regarding honesty in trade and business. His people were not to steal, deal falsely, or misrepresent themselves or the quality of their goods and workmanship when doing business. They were not to take advantage of customers, use faulty scales, or sell shoddy merchandise. The old adage "Let the buyer beware" was not to apply to business dealings with the Lord's people. Instead anyone doing business or trading in Israel was to be impressed with trustworthiness and integrity with which the Lord's own conducted commerce. They were to say, "I'd do business with one of those people any day. They treat you right."

Likewise, business owners were to treat their employees fairly. We heard a specific prohibition against holding the wages of day laborers overnight. The understanding was that some workers might be leading a so-called hand to mouth existence; and if they didn't get paid, they (and their families) didn't get to eat – so workers were to be paid daily. This also ensured that employers treated their workers well. Since the boss paid out every day, no one was forced to come back the next day and work for a guy who was a slave driver or who made his workers miserable. They'd find someone else to work for. By paying the hands daily, an employer pretty much had to ensure that his employees were happy in their jobs and felt that they were being treated fairly: honest wages for honest work. Anyone working for one of God's people was to be able to say, "My boss is concerned about me and my family and he treats us well."

Then comes the Lord's command not to curse a deaf person or to put a stumbling block in the path of a blind person. And what he's talking about here are all the kinds of cruel, dirty tricks that people sometimes do to entertain themselves at the expense of others who are disadvantaged. For example, someone might derive a sense of sadistic pleasure by smiling broadly and pretending to be friendly while saying all kinds of horrible things to someone who can't hear. Similarly, someone might think it's a funny joke to sneak into a blind

person's home and rearrange the furniture, so he gets lost and stumbles over everything. Yeah, really funny. These are the specific examples; but in a broader sense we understand that the Lord didn't want his people to amuse themselves by capitalizing on the weakness or handicaps of others. Quite the contrary, his people were to be known for their helpfulness, their kindness, and their compassion for those who are disadvantaged.

Furthermore, the fairness and integrity of the Lord's people was to extend to their practice of law. The courts were to be just and fair in their decisions, neither showing favoritism to the rich and powerful, as is sometimes done by those hoping to be rewarded for their part in bending the rules their way; nor unjustly benefiting the poor and underprivileged, as is sometimes done when judges and juries begin to think in a Robin Hood sort of way. The courts were to uphold the law and so guarantee justice for all. They were not to be used to legally steal from people or to perform social experiments in wealth redistribution. Everyone was to resist the temptation to use good laws for evil purposes. As I read this I couldn't help but think of that story a few weeks ago about a man in Washington D.C. who was suing his drycleaner for 54 million dollars because they had lost a pair of his pants. The fellow reasoned that since they had a sign in their window that read "Satisfaction Guaranteed" and he wasn't quite satisfied that he was rightly entitled to that enormous sum in compensation – even though the cleaning service had offered to pay to replace the pants. Fortunately, the court had the good sense to throw the case out (something that should happen a lot more often with these sorts of silly and frivolous lawsuits). But the thing that was most disturbing about the case is that it was a district court judge – a guy whose job it is to make fair decisions according to the law – who filed the lawsuit. I'd sure hate to be sued by someone in his court. And it beggars the imagination to understand how a guy so clearly detached from reality could sit on the bench to begin with. That kind of nonsense was not to be tolerated among God's people. Instead they were to be known as a nation where the laws were applied evenhandedly and with equity, wisdom, and fairness for all.

And in all their interaction with others the Lord wanted his people to be careful to protect one another's good names. The Lord tells Moses that "No one is to go about spreading slander or telling lies about anyone." Few things in life are as important or as fragile as a reputation. Though it's cliché to say it, it's true: you spend a lifetime building one—but it only takes a single lie to destroy it for good. Therefore the Lord decreed that his people treat each other's reputations as precious as their own. They were to be known as the type of people who never said an unkind or untruthful word about anyone. And when they did have good reason to be upset with someone, rather than go about simmering with anger, complaining about them behind their backs, and plotting revenge, they were to confront the person with their offense head on. In this way they were to avoid both the sins of harboring hatred in their hearts and of allowing someone who's doing something wrong to continue in their way unrebuked and uncorrected. The Lord wanted his people to deal with each other's offenses openly and directly so that problems could be resolved and so that harmony could be restored where it had been broken. He wanted it said of his people that they truly loved each other as they loved themselves.

That's how he wanted his Old Testament people to be. That's how he wanted them to be known because, after all, they were his witnesses to the world. People were supposed to be able to look at them and see what a wise and loving God they must have for them to be the way they were. That's what the Lord wanted of them: for them to bear the holiness of his name before the world. I'm sorry to say that he was disappointed almost 100% of the time. The question for each one of us to ask this morning is this: "Is he also disappointed in me? What does my behavior tell people about the God who loved me and sent his Son to die for me?"

We call ourselves Christians, which means, incidentally, "little christs". That's what we became when God in his grace and mercy placed his name upon us when through faith we were reborn into his family in the sin-cleansing water of Holy Baptism. Then he delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son. Then he declared us to be his own holy people. And now, on account of it, he holds us to a higher standard. How are we doing when evaluated by that standard? How are *you* doing? What would people say about you? Or of us collectively? One thing's for sure: it's good that we live each day in the blood bought forgiveness of God's Son. But that's also what makes us a holy people called by God to live according to a higher standard. Receiving to ourselves once again the assurance of his

forgiveness, let us both through our words and our actions strive to be what he has made us through our Savior Jesus Christ the Lord. In his holy name that we bear. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***