

You Shine as Lights in the World

In the name of him to whom has been given all authority in heaven and on earth, dear friends in Christ: we Lutherans are known for the emphasis we place on correct doctrine. We want our teaching of biblical truth to be spot on; and in particular, our teaching on *justification*, which is the central article of the Christian faith. It's the heart of the Gospel: that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in the suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ without any merit, work, or worthiness in ourselves. And why do we stress this so strongly? It's because we know that Satan's most effective deception to undermine and destroy a Christian's simple faith is to turn his eyes away from what Christ has done on the cross to secure our salvation and turn it toward what the believer himself does or thinks or feels – and to make that part of the bargain, so to speak. That is, Satan wants to cause the believer to combine Christ's perfect accomplished work with his own contribution, however small, toward his ultimate salvation. Satan knows that by doing this, the Christian's attention will be forced to focus on the weakest link in the chain, which will be always be the believer's own contribution. And that, in turn, will lead the believer either to self-righteousness (I've done my part! God must be pleased with me! Gosh, I'm good!) or to despair (I can't ever seem to do well enough. I must be lost!). We can't let this happen. So we preach, teach, and confess *Christ crucified*. It's trusting *in him* that we're saved. And we want to keep the notion that anything we do or don't do or think or feel or *whatever* has anything to do with our salvation. We want to keep faith in Christ and the things we do on opposite ends of the pole.

In fact, we are so insistent on this that we are sometimes accused, not without cause, of avoiding what's called *sanctification*, which is all about the godly life that naturally flows from having saving faith in Christ. You see, a person with saving faith in Christ has the Holy Spirit dwelling within, and also has a renewed nature that by nature wants to do God's good and gracious will. So, from proper faith in Christ must flow the fruits of faith: the fruits of love, joy, peace, and righteous behavior. But it's like we're so afraid of anyone mixing or confusing the two that we don't even want to talk about the latter. We're afraid that someone might misunderstand and begin to believe that works that result *from* having saving faith might have something to do with *attaining* salvation.

But this is wrong. We must speak of the works and godly life that come from having saving faith in Jesus. It's necessary because they're part of what it means to be a Christian. And for our guide in showing us how to do this without creating confusion we have none other than St. Paul, God's great champion of proclaiming faith alone in Christ for salvation to the exclusion of any work we might do. This is Paul's consistent message – and yet, in today's Epistle, we hear him urging the faithful at Philippi to live their faith in Christ by the things they do. Let's pay close attention to how he does it.

He begins, "If there is any encouragement in Christ, if any comfort from [his] love, if there is any fellowship in the Spirit, if any compassion or mercy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." I have to admit that Paul's repeated use of the word "if" in that passage threw me off at first; but then I understood he means it in a rhetorical way. *Of course* the Christians at Philippi are encouraged by their faith in Christ. They know what a treasure they have in the forgiveness of sins purchased for them by his precious blood. They rejoice in the eternal life they've been given freely through him. So also they are comforted by Christ's love. And they've been brought together into one

fellowship by the same Holy Spirit. They've received God's compassion and mercy. And so what Paul is saying is if you have these things, *and I know that you do*, then fill my heart with joy by letting them unite you in your common confession of Christ, and let them make you *one* in your thoughts, in your spirits, and in your love for one another.

Paul, the evangelist who first brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Philippi, who planted the first Christian church there, and who over the years had watched over the spiritual growth of the congregation, longs to see the fruit of the Gospel being lived in the lives of its members. And this fruit is to be manifest in their unity of mind, spirit, and love. And since they already share the same faith and have the same Holy Spirit, the primary thing Paul wants to see is *love*.

We use that word in a lot of different ways in our culture; but when Paul uses it, he's not talking about feelings of affection or romantic love. Nor does he mean it in the same way someone might say that they love ice cream sundaes. That's not the idea at all. When Paul speaks of Christian love he means a conscious determination to live sacrificially for others. Christian love says, "My life is not about me. It's not what I want or what's best for me. No, the question is what's best for you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, and what can I do to serve that end?" And to drive home this point, Paul names two great enemies of love. "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit", he says. You remember how the disciples of Jesus were always vying for top honors. Their goal was to be great in God's Kingdom. They wanted others to serve them. Jesus turned it around. He said the greatest in God's Kingdom was the one who was the *servant* of all. The Church of Christ is unlike any earthly kingdom in which everyone is in competition, each person looking out for number one. No, it's to be a family in which we look out for each other, share and share alike, everyone contributing to their best ability their time, their effort, their talents, and their resources for the good of the whole – and in particular, for those who need them the most.

Continuing the thought, Paul says, "In humility count others more significant than yourselves." This would have been a radical idea. Society in the ancient world was highly stratified and class conscious, much more so than we are used to. On top were the Roman patricians or nobles, beneath them a layer of high class yet secondary citizens and noble-wannabees; then there were the plebeians, or common folk. But even the least of the plebeians, if he was a Roman citizen, was higher up the chain than a person from one of the conquered provinces. And underneath everyone were the slaves, who, oddly enough, had their own order of classes based upon who their masters were. But everyone knew where this stood in this order. They knew who they had to honor and show respect to, and they knew who they could look down upon (and they did). What Paul is saying is that among the faithful there are to be no such distinctions. No matter who you are, view everyone else as being your betters, and willingly subordinate yourself to them and to their needs and wellbeing.

To illustrate this idea in action, Paul gives the example set by the Lord Jesus himself, who, though he was the eternal Son of God possessing all power, glory, and might yet for our sakes came to this earth, took upon himself our fallen flesh, and carried the curse of our sin to the ultimate humiliation: his brutal death on the cross. The greatest in God's Kingdom made himself the least and the servant of all. The point being that if the Lord of glory could stoop so low to save us, how much more should we who claim to follow him be willing to serve each other in all humility? Let's face it: we don't have nearly so far to bend down to serve each other as did the Lord Jesus.

And do this, Paul says, without grumbling or disputing. He knows that the sinful nature still adheres to us, and so there is bound to arise within the heart feelings of resentment and

frustration: “Why am I the one who gets all the dirty, thankless jobs? Why is it always me who ends up doing the work or paying the bills or lending a hand or serving on this or that board? Why aren’t these other people doing more – what’s only their fair share?” Paul warns us to recognize these feelings of self pity and these judgments of others for the sins they are, and to repent of them before they get out of hand. Then Christ, by his forgiveness and the power of his Spirit, can raise up once again the new person within who wants to love and serve even as Jesus did – and indeed, continues to do for all of us in his holy church.

And then, Paul says, doing this you will be “blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation among whom you shine as lights in the world.” That’s the goal: to let the light of Christ shine forth in this dark world. Our love for one other is to be that light. It’s to be seen so that those on the outside, who as yet are in the dark, will be drawn to Christ.

And I want you to know that this worked. In the first several centuries of Christendom there were many attempts made by Roman authorities to stamp out the new faith. They always failed. And while there were a lot of reasons for this, one of the biggest factors was that the Christians were doing things no one else in that society was. They were caring for the poor and needy. They were treating the sick and injured. They were taking in orphans and the infants others were discarding (in that day unwanted babies were left to die by exposure and the Christians would rescue them and raise them as their own children). People noticed this – they couldn’t help it. It made some ask, “Why are you doing these things?” which opened the door to evangelism and often made the church grow. But even those who didn’t want to know saw the benefit in having Christians around. It meant that if they were ever in need, they knew where they could go for help – and so they helped protect the Christians and helped hide them from the authorities in times of persecution. It was such a problem for one of the emperors who wanted to rid the world of Christians that he decided that the only way to do it was to have the Roman government itself take on the kinds of charitable works the Christians were doing. They tried this and failed, by the way. Why? Because their acts of charity were not motivated by Christian love. They were good works, sure; but they lacked the light of Christ. And the difference is evident to anyone who can see.

And this, of course, is our calling: to shine as lights in our dark world; to let the light of Christ’s love that we show forth by our humble service to one another be a brilliant beacon that draws others to Christ and that illumines and warms the entire lives of we who dwell safely within his Church. And what kind of lights should we be? Well, certainly not fancy crystal chandeliers that sparkle brightly and draw attention to themselves. No, we should strive to be more like a humble utility lamp – one of those bare bulbs with a handle and a wire cage – or a flashlight that is immensely useful and can go to wherever is the darkness or suffering or want that needs to be relieved. No pretention, no seeking status or reward; just the desire to serve and to put forth the effort to do as Christ would have us do.

This, as I said, is to be true of all of us; and yet today we are blessed to have among us two young adults, Kaila Weiss and Micah Buss, who will, very shortly, be dedicating themselves to the Lord’s service – to shine as lights for Christ in a special capacity: as commissioned ministers of his Church. Then they, together with Doreen Hodges, who has already been commissioned and has been serving the St. John Kindergarten, will be installed as teachers at Clarinda Lutheran School. And there they will serve according to the Lord’s good pleasure not just as educators, but specifically as *Christian* educators. There they will serve Christ by serving some of those the Lord himself called the greatest in his kingdom: “These little ones who believe in me.” It’s a noble task to teach children the useful knowledge and skills they will

employ for a lifetime; but how much more noble and vital it is to include in their teaching the knowledge of Christ and him crucified that results in life eternal? And because this is true, it's important that they not only convey the truths of Christ, but also that they model their faith before their charges, serving as living examples of Christ's love in action. They must let the light of Christ's love show forth in their lives so that they can pass it on, so that the children they serve will be equipped to shine in their generation.

This is especially important in our dark times. If the statistics are right and I have no reason to doubt them, then about half the kids we baptize in the Lutheran Church are never confirmed; and only about a quarter of those who are confirmed, who stand before the altar of God and take a solemn oath to suffer all, even death before leaving the faith, actually remain active members of the church. In far too many of our youth, the lights are going out. And so every parent, every grandparent, and especially you teachers must be aware of the influence you have, and of your need to let your light shine brightly and clearly before the children you serve.

In wrapping up this section of his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul encourages the members to hold fast to the Word of life he gave them "so that on the Day of Christ, I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain." He means that when the Day of Judgment comes, he wants to see them also standing in glory to receive their heavenly reward. Then Paul, as if with a parent's pride, will be able to say, "My work was not wasted. I had a part in God's great plan of bringing all of you here." This will not be sinful pride; but the pride of knowing that his humble, loving service for his brothers and sisters helped bring them through this dark age and to life eternal.

May our gracious God and Father grant us all such pride on the Day of Christ, and to that end, may he give us the grace to live the saving faith we confess, shining forth his love as lights in the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!