

Way to Go

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: I'm not sure how much you're aware of it; but we Lutherans are often sharply criticized by our fellow Christians from other church bodies for being weak when it comes to telling people how to actually live the Christian life. Oh, they'll compliment our doctrine, especially when it comes to the Gospel itself. They'll readily agree that we always keep Christ and his sacrificial death on the cross to save sinners first, foremost, and in front where it belongs. And they'll praise our emphasis on how God's forgiveness and the gift of salvation are ours in Christ by grace alone through faith alone. I think it's accurate to say that they admire these things about us. But almost without exception they say that where we fall down is on the follow up – on teaching people how to live the sanctified life and walk in the ways of the Lord.

And there's a reason for that. It's because as Lutherans we are warily suspect of anything that gives off even the slightest whiff of legalism. We know where that road leads: back to the bitter bondage of the law. And we know how slippery the slope is, so we're careful to avoid even getting close to the edge. We want to keep well clear. We are properly zealous of preserving the freedom we have been given in Christ. So, when we hear, "Okay, now that you are a Christian, here's the list of do's and don'ts", all kinds of red flags go up. We just don't see the Christian life that way. Nor do we see the Holy Scripture as primarily a rule book that tells us how to behave, or as a guidebook that teaches us how to be successful. This is why in a Lutheran Church you won't hear sermons with titles like: "Ten Bible principles for making your business more profitable", or "Seven parenting tips gleaned from the story of Jacob", or "Be fit and eat right by the Daniel method" or "Samson's five spiritual insights for personal grooming and hair care". And yes, some of those examples were a bit tongue-in-cheek; but you get the idea: as a rule we don't do the sorts of "How to" lessons that tend to be standard fare for many of our Evangelical neighbors. We just don't believe that's the way to go.

Instead, when we consider God's perfect and holy commands that are set forth in the Bible, we see them primarily as insurmountable obstacles. They aren't given to us so that we try to figure out how much harder we have to strive to do better and thus raise ourselves up to meet them; rather they are intended to crush us and condemn us utterly so that we see how futile are our efforts to please the Lord and thus how much more we need the Savior Jesus Christ and the forgiveness he sacrificed himself to secure. For us, growth in Christian faith and life is defined not in learning how to *do better*, but rather in learning to despise our doings altogether so that we trust in Jesus all the more.

Ah, but someone will protest, "Yes, but shouldn't true Christian faith produce good works?" And the answer is, "Yes, of course; but that's exactly the point: these good works are not what we do by all our striving to be good; they are the good Christ and his Spirit who by faith dwell within us do. And the more we trust in Christ, the more he indwells us, and so the more these works will be seen flowing naturally from our new, redeemed natures.

"All right", the argument will come next, "then shouldn't we at least be able to say what these good works are that we expect to see flowing from the new nature? Can't we

say what it is we're to be striving for?" And the answer is yes and no. If it's just another sneaky way to slip in that list of do's and don'ts that put us back under the law again, then no. But if it's being used as a sort of guide or model as a basis for giving direction and encouragement ... well, *that's* more of the idea. Or say it another way: the good produced in a Christian's life can't be prescribed; it can only be described.

What do I mean? Well, in this morning's Gospel lesson, after explaining that he himself must go to Jerusalem and there be rejected, suffer many things, die, and rise again, Jesus tells his disciples how they are to follow him. Specifically, he describes the way to go in a Christian's life as one of taking up a cross and following his lead. So, for a Christian the way to go is quite literally the *way to go*, as in "Oh, what a way to go!" It's the way of the cross, the way of death. And that makes perfect sense: Jesus came to give up his life for us. To follow him means giving up your as well.

And this is another reason why the Christian life can't be reduced to a mere list of do's and don'ts. Bearing a cross by definition means that you don't get to choose the cross you bear. Instead, you are to respond in faith to the crosses – whatever they are – that the Lord sends you. So, one Christian's cross and walk of faith may end up looking very different than another's. For example: we know that in the early centuries of the Christian era, the faithful were often subject to periods of terrible persecution as the government of Rome attempted to stamp out faith in Jesus. So, imagine you're one of the faithful back then, and you hear that they're rounding up Christians and crucifying them or sending them to the lions. What should you do? For some Christians, especially for those who are relatively unattached, say older persons who have no dependent children or young adults who have yet to begin a family – for them the way of the cross might be to actually take a cross and die as a witness to their faith in Christ. But that might not be the way for someone else, say a man who has a wife and four young children to take care of. For him the way of the cross might be to give up his land, his business, his place in the community and move his family to someplace where they're safe but where he can find only menial work to support them. The point is that both the one who dies as a martyr and the one who flees are being faithful to Jesus. They're both making sacrifices on account of their faith and living under the cross even though their paths are quite different.

Of course, living when and where we do, it's highly unlikely that any of us will ever be subject to the sort of persecution experienced by those early followers of Jesus. True, it still goes on in some places in the world, and it may be that due to some strange set of circumstances in the future one or more of us might be called to martyrdom, or we may have to flee to protect the lives of our loved ones. I don't know.

But I do know that even though we may not be called to make that kind of sacrifice, we are still called to take up our crosses and follow Jesus. We are called by Christ our Lord to die – if not in an overt physical sense, then in a spiritual sense. This is what we heard St. Paul saying in last week's Epistle lesson. He said, "Offer yourselves up as living sacrifices." And then we heard him go on to explain part of what he meant.

He said that we in the church have all been called together into one body. And just as the various limbs and organs of a human body all have a purpose and function which they exercise for the good of the whole body, so God has apportioned gifts and talents to each of us that we are to put to work on behalf of and for the good of all. So, he said, suppose your gift is organization and leadership. If that's the case, you ought to

step up to the plate and lead enthusiastically. Or suppose your gift is teaching. In that case you should be actively seeking opportunities to do it for the church. Or suppose the Lord has blessed you with lots of money. If that's true, then you should be giving generously. And the whole idea is that we are to do these things *sacrificially*. It's not a question of what you want to do because by nature we'd all like to hold back and look out for number one. It's exactly that part of you that is to die so that the gifts God has given you can be put to work for the good of his whole church.

Okay, with all this in mind, today's Epistle lesson picks up right where last week's left off. Having discussed how each one is to employ their own peculiar talents for the good of all, Paul begins to describe the general attitudes and behaviors that are to be evident in every member of the church. And unfortunately, the translation we heard made it sound exactly like a list of commands: Abhor evil. Hold fast to the good. Love each other. Outdo one another in showing honor. Don't be slothful. Serve the Lord. On and on the list goes. But that's not how it reads in the original language. Instead all these verbs that have been translated as imperatives (that is, commands) are actually present participles (the mere mention of which will no doubt cause some of you painful flashbacks of the fourth grade English class in which you had to learn the parts of speech. But to refresh your memory, you make a verb a present participle by adding "ing".)

What that means is that instead of a list of commands, what we have is a description of ongoing traits and attitudes that guide us in the way of the cross. It's like I said before, the good in a Christian's life can't be *prescribed*; it can only be *described*. It's the difference between someone standing over you and dictating instructions while thumping their finger on your chest or coming along beside you in an encouraging sort of way and saying, "Okay, you're moving now. Let's go over this way, shall we?" That's more of the idea.

And for convenience sake, we can break the list of descriptions Paul gives us into three sections. The first has to do with believers and their interaction with one another in the church. Go along with them, Paul says, "your love being genuine". Actually, what he says is "not being hypocritical". It's an interesting word. In Greek, the word "hypocrite" literally means "behind a mask". It was the word they used for actors in the Greek plays who held up masks before their faces to play the various characters. So, a hypocrite is one who hides his true self from the world and pretends to be someone he's not. And you understand what Paul is talking about here. Sometimes coaches will tell their teams to put on a "game face". It means look tough and mean. In a similar way, we're all tempted to put on a church face when we gather here together. It's that skin-deep smile and cheerfulness that says "I'm really happy to see you" when you're not, or that furrowed brow of concern you wear when someone's telling you about their problems while you're really thinking, "Do honestly you think I care?" And the idea is that we're to recognize when we're doing that – wearing a church face – and repent of it; putting to death that selfish nature so the Christ's genuine love will come through. Because I'll tell you, he is happy to see that person here. And he is genuinely concerned about their problems.

Paul continues to describe the way a Christian goes, "Abhorring what is evil and clinging to what is good." He's calling us to make sharp distinctions and exercise sound judgment in moral matters. In issues in which God has spoken there's no such thing as

shades of gray. You know what's bad. Keep on hating it. You know what's good. Never let it go.

He goes on with various other descriptions of the Christian walk encouraging us to go along rejoicing in our hope of eternal life, being patient in times of tribulation, and constantly praying. One more I'd like to highlight is his reminding us to be contributing to the needs of the saints. It's important to understand that we need to set priorities in our charitable giving. We don't have the resources to feed all the world's hungry or house all the homeless. Our first priority is to the needs of our immediate family, then to the broader church family – the members of the local congregation, and then to other Christians in need. And part of the goal here is to keep the resources that are needed connected to the Gospel message of salvation.

Of course, that doesn't mean we are to neglect those who are outside the church. Paul describes our interaction with them as "striving to show hospitality"—which, sadly, is another awkward translation. What he actually says is that we are to be, "in the love of strangers striving". He means that we are to be friendly, open, welcoming, seeking to accommodate, and willing to serve people we don't know. And coupled with what he says about humility and not being haughty, it suggests too that we seek to avoid judgments based on appearance, race, income level, or any other external. Christ died for all people, and he would have them to be part of his family. How sad it would be for Jesus to open the door to someone only to have one of us slam it shut.

Finally, Paul describes our interaction with the enemies of the church, encouraging us to show kindness to our persecutors, bless those who curse and ridicule us, and to repay them good for the evil they inflict upon us. And of course, it's in these actions that the transforming power of Christ's love is most clearly seen – and I can say with certainty that it's also where we have the hardest time taking the cross and truly living out the Christian life we've been called to. I'd say that we all have a long, long way to go.

So, let it not be said that we as Lutherans aren't concerned about striving to live the Christian life. Instead, let us constantly, as we go, recognize how short we fall of the standard that Jesus set for us precisely so that by our continuing repentance and increased reliance on his achievements he may work his love in us. It's the only way to go. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!