

Fifth Evening Prayer of Lent

Bulletin

'I counted all as loss for the sake of Jesus Christ.'

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The days draw near when we will bend our hearts to consider the labor of our Lord Christ for the sake of sinners and scoffers.

Many these days scoff at the idea of God having to suffer on our behalf. He is God; He could redeem us in any way He saw fit, *in the twinkling of an eye*, or a mere whim of the divine counsel. Why would the Father send His Son to endure the cross? It is a barbaric idea, that our sin must be punished, if not in ourselves, then in someone else. Why can God not simply forgive and forget? Why meet out any punishment at all, much less on His own Son? Is this not, as they say, divine child-abuse? Why not choose another way?

We today like to think of restorative justice. When one steals, instead of punishing them, why not reform them? It seems so much more merciful, so much kinder, even so much more Christian. If we, simple Christians, can imagine such a concept for our legal system, why cannot God do the same? Why not simply reform us, and leave the cross alone?

We indeed are thieves, one and all, who seek to take God's rule as our own. Yet do we not deserve a little dignity, and a chance to do better?

Many did in fact seek to reform, that they might be made worthy to re-enter into the society of God, into His kingdom, not through being redeemed, but through being, as it were, law-abiding citizens.

Among these, St. Paul proved the greatest: *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

In whatsoever righteousness that could be found by keeping the law, of this Paul could boast, for in every regard he strove in all aspects of life to conform himself to the eternal kingdom of the Creator, striving to uphold His laws and decrees, to do His will, and to please His countenance.

And indeed, this is all that was asked of God. The Almighty Himself declared the Law upon Sinai; is it not, then, that we should strive to keep it? Should we not allow ourselves to be guided by this *more excellent way? A path pleasing to the Lord?*

In the wilderness, the Lord makes no mention of dying for His people, much less at their own hand. Rather, He prescribes for them a way of life, that they might live, and not die, and *grow prosperous in the land*. Surely it is enough, then, *to fear God and keep his commandments; to eat, drink, be merry, and delight in the labor of one's hands*.

This is a pleasing idea, even to the wicked, that despite our iniquity, at any point we may simply amend our ways, do good, and we will be accepted back into the good graces of polite society.

Yet St. Paul sneers at his own work, even his work to please God, betraying it and counting it all as refuse for the sake of obtaining the Lord's resurrection. All such keeping of the Law, all such zeal and strength and courage and love and loyalty to God's golden path, all is vanity and waste. But how can this be so, if the Lord Himself gave the Law to begin with?

It is the purpose of the Law that those who are evil be instructed that they might live among one another, and so not harm each other. But to have such a law is to assume the desire to break it, even as new laws are formulated today only when we discover some new form of human malice.

But in Eden it was not so, for man walked with God, knowing neither malice nor needing to be persuaded therefrom. Rather, they spoke to one another, in keeping with another law, not that delivered from Sinai, but that which descends from the heart of God from all eternity. A law that knows neither good nor evil, but rather knows God alone, and none beside Him. It is the law first declared to Israel and over and over again through the prophets, that *the Lord God is one, and beside him, there is no other*; that there is no alternative, that there is no competition. There is only life, and no death; only love, and no hate; only good, and no sin; only

God, *in whom we live and move and have our being.*

To even keep the Law is to embrace the existence of lawlessness, and for this reason it cannot save, for though it may keep our hands from evil, it cannot abolish it. It is not to choose good over evil, that God asks of us. It is to know Him, and to love His face, and to rejoice in His work, for there is only Him, and His glory, and His grace.

For this reason, Paul teaches that all righteousness that is by the Law is useless, for though it leads us away from the gate of Hell, yet Hell still stands, no matter how far we be from it.

Rather, Hell must be abolished, the devil cast into the outer darkness, and idolatry purged from creation, that God may be *Lord, and Lord alone*; that again, He might be our only vision; the lone thought of our mind by day, and the lover of our soul by night.

Christ walks before us to Jerusalem, for a war is yet to be waged, but now the hour has come. *The old must pass away, so that all things may be made new.* The Cross shall bring together all things, to the left and to the right on this earth; and all things *in heaven and on earth and below the earth*, unifying them in the bleeding body of our Savior, *that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord.*

So St. Paul, having despaired of the Law, does the only thing there is to do; to return to the Lord, that again we may walk with Him, and speak with Him, even as we once did in the garden; even if that walk be up Mount Golgotha, and that blessed conversation be upon a cross. We are, after all, thieves, and there upon the cross with us He is glad to converse. Let us return to the Lord, for all His desire is only to be with us, even as it is to become us. For repentance is nothing else than this, but to turn back.

Our meditation is coming to an end, dear Christians, let us now *set our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.* Let us pick up our cross, and follow Him,

'That we may share in his sufferings.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Text: Philippians 3:8-14.