

The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
June 8, 2008
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Call to Holiness

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity. You blind Pharisee! first cleanse the inside of the cup and of the plate, that the outside also may be clean. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. (Matthew 23:25-28)

This morning I feel led to speak to you about a truth whose importance has waned of late in the church. And yet this doctrine is so critical, so central and fundamental that Jesus takes great pains to teach it. Paul and Peter took great diligence to echo it. And the church throughout the ages has sought to recover it time and again.

Like some treasure chest half buried in sand and swept over and under by the tide, the jewels are real enough and the gold is pure enough Will we venture into the waves to find these riches?

It is a truth which when recovered praises God immensely, adorns the saints lavishly and shines forth to the glory of God brightly.

When it is lost, we see the church casting about for its purpose.

When it is lost, the unsaved see no light.

When it is lost, the name of God is blasphemed and another generation slips over the edge into the abyss.

Of what am I speaking? Holiness. Sanctification in its Latinate form.

“Holy” means set apart, dedicated to the service and worship of God.

By whatever name we call it, the truth is that God is Holy and He demands that we be Holy. This is the doctrine that God is pure and is making us pure.

There is much confusion about it. There is a gospel out there which is 100 miles wide and as deep as this piece of paper. It goes something like this:

Say “Jesus is Lord” and you’ll be saved. “Just say the magic words” some urge us to do.

It’s as if the very true doctrine that Jesus saves us almost rests on the pedestal of our inaction, and the more passive we are, the greater Jesus’ work becomes.

Add to this doctrinal confusion the fact that there is an incredible worldliness in many, perhaps most, who call themselves and are called “Christians.” That is me most of the time.

We are lazy. We don’t search out the great truths. We are content to hear a little preaching and perhaps dip into the Bible every now and then.

We are self-centered. In this day and age of labor saving devices and great wealth we probably do much less for our neighbors than was done 60 years ago.

We are undisciplined because we have lost the vision of what it means to be a church:

You are a city set on a hill.

You are the light of the world.

You are the salt of the earth.

Some time ago, I was in Milwaukee with my brother. A lady came up to me and said, “Your brother is so Irish.” I knew what she meant – her tone and the sigh said it all: “He is good looking.” I replied that I had the same genes and family and was just as Irish as he is. She said, “Yeah, you’re Irish, but he is sooo Irish.” When are we going to really look like Jesus? When will the holiness of our lives attract people to the Lord?

There is a suspicion that responding to the Lord’s call for holiness is a sure and certain way to hypocrisy. No. It is quite the opposite. A hypocrite is an actor. One who pretends or plays a role where underneath the mask there is something quite different. Jesus exposes what is underneath.

As we pray every Sunday:

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord.

One day you will meet Him who is our judge and who sees into the hearts of men as clearly as you see through the air. What will He find there? Will He find a heart marked with struggle – not perfect but a heart that has tried? Will He say “Blessed are you!” or “Woe to you!”?

God doesn't call us to act like we're holy – in fact it's this acting that is worse than anything. He says, "Be Holy as I am Holy."

God demands holiness of His people. Are you one of His people? God commands you to be holy.

Bishop Ryle in the 1870's wrote: "There are many who Sunday after Sunday repeat the Creed and make a point of declaring their belief in all that the Nicene form contains. And yet these very persons will live all the week as if Christ had never died, and as if there were no judgement, and no resurrection of the dead and no life everlasting at all." (Holiness 186)

Has anything changed?

Paul in the sixth chapter of his Second Letter to the Corinthians asks rhetorical questions – questions to which the listener of his letter should immediately know the answer:

Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Be'lial? Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? 2 Corinthians 6:14-16a

What partnership have righteousness and iniquity? None

What fellowship has light with darkness? NONE

What accord has Christ with Belial (Satan)? **NONE**

What has a believer in common with an unbeliever?

Whoa there! We were with you for the first three, but this one is different! What do believers and unbelievers have in common? These days, what don't they have in common?! They both have the same sins, the same failures, the same proclivity to selfishness, the same moral lapses. I am sure most of you have seen the bumper sticker: Christians aren't perfect. They are just FORGIVEN. This is a nice point, but I don't think it's all Jesus wants for us.

What has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Either Paul asked the wrong question or we have the wrong idea of what it means to be a believer! But of course it isn't just Paul. Our Lord Jesus makes a very probing statement, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." (John 14:15) and He reaches a very frightful statement: "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven but he who does the will of my father in heaven." (Matthew 7:21).

While neither Paul nor any of the other saints pretended to be perfect, (Paul, in fact, called himself the least of the Apostles) they did echo our Lord's call to live a changed life! And even more than echoing the call, they gave up everything to live into it. What has your faith in Jesus cost you? If it hasn't cost you anything, how much is it worth?

When I was in second grade, we boys made a pact among ourselves that we would not allow any of the second grade girls to kiss us. And the girls were doing their best to sneak up on a boy and plant a kiss on his cheek. Only the most vigilant, the most serious, would avoid them for long. I remember the day well when a certain Laura snuck up behind me to kiss me. Just as she was going to do it, I threw up my arm and she only managed to kiss the sleeve of my coat. It didn't count. Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom!

What has your faith in Jesus cost you?

What tears of remorse?

What struggle of conscience?

What moments of agonizing decision?

Has it cost you anything?

Have you turned down a job because they'd make you work on Sunday and keep you from church?

Have you broken off a friendship that led to sinful behavior?

Have you risked ridicule? Family misunderstanding? People calling you "holier than thou" or "goody two shoes"?

Has it cost you anything?

Jesus never patted a disciple on the back with the words, "You have made it. You are perfect," and never seems to expect that they will achieve perfect holiness this side of the grave, nevertheless He calls us to perfection – which is to say He calls us to walk in a certain direction (Godward); He calls us to strive and struggle and get off our comfortable rear ends and become holy.

Are you holy? Are you separate from the world for the Lord? Are you living a holy life? Do God's preferences drive your decisions? Does God's heart mean anything to you? Do you even know what God's heart is?

Oh, it is good to be comforted with the thought of God's love..... but does this comforting thought confirm you in your sin? Does it, like the Pharisees who thought that they were chosen, put you to sleep spiritually?

Do you struggle against sin and, if you fall, get up and struggle again?

Is holiness something for religious fanatics? Something for the unbalanced? Something for professionals (monks, nuns and preachers)? Something with a warning label like “These stunts done by a professional driver on a closed course. Do not attempt this at home.”?

Holiness happens when you are sitting in front of the computer and no one is watching.

Holiness happens when you have a chance to really zing someone behind their back, to say something that is perfectly true.....

Holiness happens when you are at the store and you are tempted to buy more than you need rather than give to a brother in need.

God calls you to holiness. How are you doing?

I know of no more appropriate response than to fall on our knees and confess our sin:

We are hearers of the word rather than doers.

We choose comfort over sacrifice.

We choose quietude over the vigorous walk of the saints.

We choose ourselves over You.

Lord forgive us. Help us to hear your call anew!

Please pray with me:

Almighty and most merciful Father,

we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep,

we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts,

we have offended against thy holy laws,

we have left undone those things which we ought to have done,

and we have done those things which we ought not to have done,

But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us,

spare thou those who confess their faults,

restore thou those who are penitent,

according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord;

and grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake,

that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life,

to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.