

A Faith that Works

In the name of him whom the Father gave because of his love for the world, dear friends in Christ: It may surprise you to hear it, but I really hate bad sermons. I know, I know: some of you are thinking, “Then why don’t you stop talking?” Right? But no, I’m serious: I don’t like a bad sermon any more than you do; not when I’m preaching and certainly not when I listen to someone else preach. And in my line of work, I listen to a lot of sermons on Christian radio and the internet. I also read them in books, pastor’s magazines, and on other church’s web-pages. It’s part of feeding myself spiritually, as well as a way to keep my ear to the ground concerning what’s going on in the wider world of Christianity. Sometimes I’m able to glean ideas and illustrations that I can use. But the truth is that most of the sermons I come across are just bad.

And there are many things that can make a sermon bad. False doctrine is the most obvious culprit. No one should have to sit through a sermon that teaches contrary to the Word of God. Way too many sermons fall into that category. Others are just dull. The theology in them might be spot on; but if no one can stand to listen to it, what’s the point? Some sermons are bad because they’re poorly organized. It’s impossible to follow the preacher from thought to thought because the ideas he’s presenting don’t flow in a logical manner. I’ll admit that some sermons are too long; but I don’t mind a long sermon if it’s got good content. I’ve heard five minute sermons that were too long and forty-five minute sermons that were too short. They left me wanting to hear more. Some sermons are bad because they’re overly repetitive. I sit there thinking, “I got it; I understood your point the first time you said that. What made you think you needed to tell me eight more times?” But do you know what the worst kind of sermon is? It’s one that confuses Law and Gospel. They are the worst because they can seem to be sound theologically. Everything the preacher is saying comes straight from the Bible; and yet the way he puts it all together directs people away from trust in Christ Jesus their Savior and leads them to despair. Well, last Sunday while driving to Bedford, I heard on the radio a perfect example of that kind of bad sermon.

The pastor was preaching on John chapter 8 where Jesus says, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” That is a statement of pure Gospel. Hold fast to the word of Jesus. Live in it. Remain in it. Hear it continuously. That’s what makes you his true disciple, a word that means “student” – someone who is being taught or trained. Keep hearing Jesus and you will know the truth that sets you free. What truth is that? It’s the truth that Jesus lived for you, that he died for you, and that he was raised again – *for you*. That truth sets you free from sin, death, hell, and everlasting condemnation and causes you to be God’s holy child, forgiven, redeemed, and free to love God and serve others without any kind of compulsion. That’s the Gospel: sweet and simple.

Unfortunately, that’s not what the preacher said. No, he said that it’s one thing to hear the word of Jesus and believe and trust in him as your Savior, but that doesn’t make you a true disciple. No, you must *abide* in his word, which he explained meant that you have to perfectly obey everything that Jesus taught and commanded. He said there are two kinds of Christians. There are the mere believers, who really don’t count and can’t properly be called Christians; and there are the doers of God’s Word. *They* are the true disciples of Jesus. Only *they* know really the truth. Only they have been set free. According to him genuine Christianity isn’t so much about what you *believe* about Jesus. It’s about what you *do* for him.

The problem is that if that's what the Christian faith is, then it's a faith that doesn't work. Think about it: if you actually believed what that preacher said, how could you know if you were a true disciple? Why, you'd have to look at yourself, of course. You'd have to examine what you were doing. So you'd be constantly asking yourself, am I doing everything Jesus wants me to do? Am I loving God above all things? Am I always serving him? Am I truly loving my neighbor as myself? If not, then I'm forced to the inescapable conclusion that I am not abiding in Jesus' word, which means I'm not truly his disciple. And that means I have to try harder to do what Jesus commands. So you try again and again ... you're left on this endless treadmill of trying and failing to perfectly keep the commands of Christ. And your failures only keep on proving to you that you are not truly his disciple. Far from freeing you, that preacher's sermon puts you in the worst kind of bondage and leads you to utter despair. And what's really ironic is that Jesus spoke these words to Jews who were caught up in the notion that what mattered most was obedience to the Law of God. They were people Jesus was trying to set free by turning their hearts away from trusting in their own works to trusting in him.

And I wish I could tell you that this bad sermon was an isolated and rare case; but the sad reality is that this is what millions of Bible believing, "Evangelical" Christians hear every Sunday in one form or another. It's their steady diet of spiritual food. And it brings them to one of two conditions. Either they deceive themselves into believing that they *are* fully obeying the commands of Christ, in which case they become self-righteous hypocrites rather than disciples of Jesus; or, if they look at their performance honestly, they must conclude themselves that they are not disciples of Jesus. Either way, that teaching produces no disciples for Christ. And therefore Christianity, if that's what it is, is a faith that doesn't work. No one can be a disciple.

But thank Almighty God, that's not what Christianity is. It's not about what you do. It's all about what Christ has done and continues to do for you, as today's reading from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians so clearly and emphatically states. Look where it starts: you were dead in trespasses and sins. You were blindly following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air (by which Paul means the devil – *that's* whose disciple you were). You were by nature a child of God's wrath. Got all that? Your situation was absolutely hopeless. There was nothing you could do on your own. Dead people do not respond. They don't act. They don't do. They can't. They only decay. They go from bad to worse. That's what you were. And the Lord had every right and reason to cast you into hell forever. Or as today's Gospel reading says it: because of your unbelief in the Savior God sent, you were condemned *already*. You didn't start life in a state of goodness or innocence or even moral neutrality. No, you were already judged and condemned by God.

But God who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he has – the love he showed to us in Christ by sending him to be our Savior and putting him to death on the cross for our sins – he made us alive together with Christ. It's by grace that you have been saved. Not your doing, not your worthiness, not anything God owed you; it was his grace alone: the unmerited favor with which he looked upon you, chose you, forgave your sins for Christ's sake, and lifted you up so that you are seated with him in heavenly places. It had nothing to do with you, what you were, or what you did; because if it had been dependent on you in any way, you could never be sure about it. You could never really trust it. You'd always be looking to yourself and finding that you came up short. The Lord wants you to have something solid to put your faith in. He wants you to look at Jesus. He wants you to see that it was all his work for you in Jesus his Son. He wants you to look at Jesus and his death for you on the cross.

This is illustrated in today's Old Testament lesson. The Israelites are in rebellion against God and Moses, so the Lord sends snakes into their camp. When the snakes bite, the venom

burns like fire. The victims eventually die writhing in agony and in horrible pain. It's a picture of how sin is slowly and painfully killing all of us who have rebelled against God. What happens? The people repent of their rebellion. They rightly fear God's wrath and look for a way to be saved. They ask Moses to pray to the Lord to take the snakes away, which Moses does. But the Lord doesn't take the snakes away. Instead, through Moses, he gives the people a cure for snakebites. Moses is to set up a pole on which there is a bronze image of a fiery snake. Anyone who looks at the snake on the pole, lives.

Do you see what the Lord is doing here? He's directing the people's attention entirely away from themselves. Don't look at yourself, or the snakes, or the swelling wound near the puncture marks. Don't look at what you did to get yourself in this condition. Don't think about the poison coursing its way through your system. Look at the snake on the pole. Get your focus on something completely outside of yourself. *There* is your salvation. And so it is with us. Just as Moses lifted up the snake, now the Lord lifts up his Son. Look to him. Look to what he's done. There is your salvation: Jesus Christ crucified for your sin. Put your faith in him.

And before anyone starts thinking, "Oh, well then that's my part of the bargain, isn't it? I have to put my faith in Jesus. That's the one thing I can do for myself." No, sorry; you can't even take credit for that. Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. *And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*" That is to say, if you have faith in Jesus, you didn't generate it by your own power or will. You did not decide for Jesus. You did not choose to believe in him. Rather Jesus chose you. By his Gospel he called you. And by his call and the work of the Holy Spirit on you, God gave you the faith in Jesus through which you are saved. It's *all* grace. It's *all* God's work. And that's why we can trust in it so completely. That's the truth that sets us free. We don't have to be constantly worrying about whether we've done enough, or whether we have enough faith, or whether we've committed some sin too terrible to be forgiven. We have only to look to the cross of Christ. There faith is made sure. It's the proof of God's love and the guarantee of his forgiveness. And that's why Christianity – true Christianity – is a faith that really works.

And it's a faith that works in more ways than one. We've already seen that it's internally coherent, and that it's actually possible for people to be disciples of Jesus by holding such a faith. It's possible because it doesn't depend on us and what we do. It all depends on God who does everything for us. Thus we can be true disciples of Jesus who know the truth that sets us free. But having become free in Christ from the terror of uncertainty and the burden and condemnation of the Law, we are free to actually will and to do what the Law requires.

It works like this: if you believe that being a true disciple means that you must please God by trying to keep his commandments, then you are in bondage. You fear every misstep, and you're constantly trying and failing to do what God requires. It's an exercise in futility that only gets worse over time. And the harder you try to do what's right, the more it becomes obvious that you can't. You realize that the Law of God always works against you. But once you come to understand that Jesus died for all of your sin, and that he has done everything to please God for you – to include giving you the faith that makes you a true disciple – then you understand that the Law can no longer work against you. More than that, having received the gift of faith in Jesus by the working of God's Holy Spirit, you also have received a new and sanctified nature that delights in the commands of Christ and earnestly desires to adhere to them. It's not because you must, but because that's what your new nature wants to do – and does without even thinking about it. Just like a sinner sins because that's what they do by nature, so also a child of God lives like one because that's what he or she is.

This is what St. Paul means when, after having explained that we've been saved by grace alone through faith alone apart from anything we do, he says "For we are God's workmanship in Christ, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." We aren't saved by our works; but having been saved, we do the works that God delights in. We become, in effect, his hands, doing the very things he planned for us to do in Christian love and service for our neighbors. Really, it's his work through us as we continue to abide in Christ's Word and the love of Christ permeates our very beings.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has called us to follow him and abide in his Word. May he give us the grace to be his true disciples, and by his Spirit instill in us a Christian faith that works. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!