

What Shall We Do?

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Dear Saints of God, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, the most wonderful time of the year. T'is the season to be jolly! Ho-ho-ho! And joy to the world! No, wait. Christmas is still more than two weeks away. We in the Church are not even half way through the season of Advent – the time in which we *prepare* ourselves for the joy of Christmas. We do this by recognizing that Advent is a penitential time in which we reflect deeply upon our sins – the very cause that the Lord in his love sent us his Son to be our Savior.

The trouble is that we tend to do this self-examination in a brief and superficial way. It's painful to be honest with yourself. We don't like it. So when it comes to moral housekeeping, we're like a child told that he can't go out to play until he straightens his room. He puts away a few articles that are obviously out of place; but he then crams everything else under the bed or in a closet – just so it's out of sight. Then off he goes to play claiming that the job is done. Chances are high that Junior is going to have his playtime cut short. He's not going to enjoy it like he hoped. Mom or Dad, whose evaluations of tidiness are a little more thorough, will surely call him back. Then there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth while the job is done as it should have been in the first place. And here's the thing: we don't want the joyous Christmas celebrations we hope to have similarly ruined because our spiritual preparations were shallow or half-hearted. To get the full effect, to properly receive our Savior King, we want to make sure that the job of preparation gets done right.

One summer home from college back in Oregon I worked for an outfit that fit homes with gutters and downspouts. It was the year Mt. St. Helens blew its top. A few weeks after the initial eruption, the town I lived in got hit with two inches of volcanic ash. It was raining when it fell, so all the ash that landed on people's roofs got washed into the gutters and plugged them up. It was like filling them with wet concrete and the weight tore them off of most homes. So there was plenty of work to do. My job was to go with another guy to remove what remained of the old gutters on the houses that the main crew would be working on the next day. We'd take the removed gutter pieces back to the yard and sort them for scrap: aluminum in one pile, steel in another, and so on. Anyway, one day we were loading up a trailer to turn in for salvage all the aluminum pieces we'd accumulated. I was on the ground handing up sections to my partner who was standing way up on top of the stack on the trailer. As I'm handing him a piece of gutter, he gave it a yank before I was clear of it. Its edge cut across my forearm, laying open an ugly gash from my elbow to my wrist. No arterial bleeding, but it wasn't the sort of thing you simply slap a bandage on and forget about. So I wrapped my bloody arm in a T-shirt and drove over to the hospital. It happened that our family physician was on duty. His assistant had a reputation for being a hard and efficient woman. People called her "Nurse Nazi" – though no one dare say it to her face. It was rumored that she learned her bedside manner at a school that specialized in training attack dogs. She examined my arm with a sneer of contempt – the kind that said she had suffered worse cuts while shaving (and I don't mean her legs). She handed me one of those abrasive plastic sponges soaked in Betadine and told me to clean up the wound to prepare it for dressing. Well, it hurt, so I was wiping at it rather gingerly; but trying to be thorough. Her eyes filled with malevolent fury. She grabbed my wrist, and said, "No! Not like that! Do it like this!" And she started scrubbing with enough force to remove the flesh from the bone. Did I mention that it hurt? One thing's for sure: when she was done, that wound was clean. Absolutely sanitized. No germ could possibly have survived the assault. I barely did.

Now, as tough as sounds to say, *that's* what we need to help us in our moral housecleaning to prepare for the Lord's coming: someone who is more concerned with getting

the job done right than about the discomfort that might be inflicted in the process. We need that outside inspector: someone whose standards of perfection are as flawless as God's own, and who is mercilessly insistent and brutally honest in their application. We need someone with all the tact and sensitivity of a drill sergeant, someone who's going to force us to look under the beds and into the closets of our lives, someone who will make sure that we deal with all that stuff that we pretend is not there and that we'd rather not deal with.

For this very purpose, the Lord gave us John the Baptist. He's the one sent to prepare us properly for the Lord's coming. Where we would lightly dab at our dirty souls with a damp sponge, John lets us have it with power sprayer filled with hydrogen peroxide. And where we would prefer to use a candle to search out the darkness in our hearts, John lights things up as if with a flamethrower. His mission is to shake us out of our spiritual lethargy. He means to leave no stone unturned in his pursuit of moral imperfections and spiritual uncleanness in your life. When he points his finger at us and calls us a "Brood of vipers", that is, the children of the devil, it ought to make you tremble. And when he asks, "Who warned you to flee the wrath to come?" you should feel the warm draft of hellfire beneath your feet and realize that you are teetering on the brink of eternal damnation.

That's how the people in the crowds who went out into the desert to hear John felt. And mind you, these were not godless, idol worshipping pagans. These were God's chosen people Israel. They had been raised in the faith. They were outwardly good, church going people. More than that, they had been baptized by John for the forgiveness of their sins. And yet he flames on them as if each and every one of them were still the chief of sinners. Forget your fine pedigree, John told them. God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones. Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. The axe is laid to the root of the trees. And if you're not producing the fruit that the Lord desires, you *will* be chopped down and thrown into the fire.

At this his terrified hearers respond, "What then shall we do?" And I want you to pay close attention to what John does *not* say. Recall that on that first Pentecost Sunday after Jesus had risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, Peter preached to the curious crowd that had assembled, astonished that the Apostles were speaking in many different languages. In his sermon, Peter convicted them all of being complicit in the death of the Messiah. Their consciences stricken and terrified of their impending doom, they cried out, "What shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." That is to say, Peter goes straight to the Gospel to set their hearts at ease. But John doesn't do that. No, quite the opposite, John takes his hearers back to the Law. "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise."

You see what John is doing: he's not letting people off the hook so easily. True repentance demands that you seek to amend your sinful ways and do better to live the life of Christian love. And this is our problem: so accustomed are we to hearing the good news of our forgiveness for Christ's sake, that we don't take our sins very seriously. We fall into the same ruts and patterns. "I sin; God forgives. I sin again (same sin); but it's all good because God forgives. Easy-peasy. It's almost like God ought to thank me for sinning so that he has something to forgive since he loves doing it so much.

That's where John steps in and says "No. Don't make it easy. Make it hard. Nurse Nazi hard. John the Baptist hard. Honestly evaluate yourself in the light of God's Law. Actually confront your sins. Despise them. Hate what you have been doing. Fear God's wrath. And bear the fruits of repentance.

What shall we do? Let's get specific. We are blessed to have the catechism to help us in this process. [I'll ask you to turn to page 321 in the hymnal.] In the first chief part, the Ten Commandments, Luther had the insight to include in his explanations not only what each command prohibits in a negative sense, but also what it demands of you in a positive sense. So, we take the first: You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. Well, do you? Do you fear God? Then why are you so glib about breaking his commandments? Do you love him above all things? He said, "If you love me, keep my commandments." Do you trust him above all things? Or do you have other idols that you place your trust in to provide you security and wellbeing like your wealth, or your health, or your good sense, your education, and your natural talents?

Second command: You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie, or deceive by his name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks. Here we go: have you or do you routinely invoke God's name in casual conversation where it has no place as in the oft repeated exclamation "Oh my God!"? What's he supposed to do? Answer, "What? Why do you keep using my name when you don't have anything to say to me?" Do you use God's name to damn people, livestock, or every frustrating situation that you're in? Have you broken or are you even now breaking a sacred oath? Do you tolerate false doctrine, that is, lies told in God's name? Do you pray to the Lord in every trouble? Give him thanks for all your blessings? Praise him for everything that happens in your life whether it's good or bad?

Third command: Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it. Oh boy. "Hearing the Scriptures read and listening to the pastor's sermon is the high point of my week. Wild horses couldn't keep me away." No? Then you don't hold the Word sacred nor do you appreciate its power. Try this: "I look forward to my daily Scripture readings and our family devotions, and I make the most of every available opportunity to learn and better understand what God in his Word has to say." The fruit of repentance would look a lot like that.

Fourth command: Honor your father and your mother. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them. I'll start with the children who still live at home with their parents. "When told to do something by mom or dad, I always do it immediately and gladly, without arguing, talking back, or whining. I look for ways to be helpful around the house. I love mom and dad, and want to please them in every way I can. Same thing at school: I listen to my teachers, do all my assigned work to the best of my abilities, and I never break any of the rules." If that doesn't describe you, start now to bear the fruit of repentance. Those of us who are older are not off the hook. We're called upon to honor and support our parents in their old age, also gladly and without complaint. In addition, we are called to observe the laws of the land, and to respect, honor, obey, and pray for our civil leaders – regardless of their party affiliation.

The Fifth command: You shall not murder. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every physical need. Here we begin by asking, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan by which he explained that everyone – even your worst enemy – is your neighbor. He further explained that it's not just physical violence that's prohibited, but also verbal assault in the form of insults or angry words directed against anyone. On the positive side we are to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, shelter

the homeless, defend the defenseless, and hold all human life from conception to natural death to be sacred.

Sixth command: You shall not commit adultery. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we lead a sexually pure and decent life in what we say and do, and husband and wife love and honor each other. This is a tough one because we live in a culture that has not only gone nose blind to the stench of sexual sin, but now openly advocates and celebrates it. But here we are called to uphold the biblical ideal of marriage as God designed it: one man and one woman in lifelong commitment and mutual love, support, and respect; that such a marriage is only proper place for sexual intimacy to occur and it's our duty to decry and abhor all abuses; and that we should do everything in our power to keep not only our own sacred marriage vows, but also to help and encourage others to keep theirs as well.

Seventh command: You shall not steal. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbor's money or possessions, or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his possessions and income. It goes beyond not just taking things from others by any illicit means, but we are called as God's children to actually help them to prosper even if it means at the expense of our own time, effort, and profit margin.

Eighth command: You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way. Here we are to recognize that words can be used as weapons to destroy reputations or as the materials to build up and protect them. We are to use them only for the latter.

In the interest of time I'll address the ninth and tenth commandments together, since both prohibit the sin of covetousness. What is coveting? It's wanting something in a sinful way. What makes a desire sinful? First, a desire is sinful if it is born of lack of contentment. "I can't be happy unless I possess this thing. Second, a desire is sinful if it is for something that the Lord has prohibited, like someone else's spouse. And third, a desire for something is sinful if it causes you to consider taking illicit means to acquire it. The fruit of repentance for these two commands takes the form of complete contentment and grateful thanks to God for the blessings and possessions that you do have.

There's more: As God's child you are called to love your neighbors as yourself, and to forgive every sin and insult against you as freely and completely as you have been forgiven by God for Christ's sake. And when you don't, you are not bearing the fruit of repentance. More than that, by not forgiving, you are placing yourself in danger of hellfire – as Jesus explains in the Parable of the Unmerciful debtor: the man who was forgiven a huge debt but then refused to forgive a fellow servant who owed him comparatively little.

Today God through John calls you to bear fruits in keeping with repentance. Engage the struggle with your own sinful flesh, actively putting it to death. In this way prepare the way of the Lord. Make his path into your heart straight. By so doing, he who began his good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus Christ, and you will rejoice all the more when you with all flesh shall see the salvation of God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!