

The Christian Standard

In the name of him in whom all shall be made alive, dear friends in Christ: The season of Epiphany, now soon drawing to its close, is about light—specifically the Light of Christ spreading and expanding throughout the world, bringing those who are lost in darkness into a right understanding of who Jesus is and what he has come to do for our salvation. We've seen this Light growing brighter in intensity, first with the star that led the eastern sages to come and worship the Christ Child; then at his Baptism when the voice of the Father declared Jesus the beloved Son; and then in several miracles by which Jesus revealed more and more of his divine nature. But this Light shines most brightly in the teaching of Jesus as he who is the Light of the world brings divine light to our dark minds and hearts by the words he speaks and that enter into us through our ears.

We saw this last week as we heard the beatitudes and woes with which Jesus begins the Sermon on the Plain as it is recorded in St. Luke's Gospel. Spiritual enlightenment means seeing that things are not as they appear. Jesus explains that those who are self-sufficient, who trust in their own wealth, wits, and natural abilities, who perpetually seek their own pleasures, and who appear by all worldly standards to be living the high life are in fact under the curse of God. Meanwhile the truly blessed are those who understand that they are beggars before the Lord. They grieve over their sins and they look to the Lord to give his mercy and forgiveness. They place all of their trust in him. This is what it means to walk the path of Christian discipleship as a child of the light.

Today's text picks up where last week's left off. Having described the basic outline of the Christian life, Jesus launches into a series of commands that tell us how we are to behave as his disciples: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. If someone smacks you on one side of your face, turn to him the other side to get smacked also. If someone wants your coat, give him your shirt too. Give to anyone who asks of you. If someone takes something from you, don't seek to have it back. Do unto others as you would have them do to you.

When it comes to setting a high standard, Jesus doesn't mess around, does he? And let me make it clear: this is the standard for the disciples of Jesus. This is what he demands of us. But before I unpack these commands in a little more detail, I need to say that what Jesus says here is often misunderstood. Some take these words to mean that Jesus is teaching an extreme form of pacifism, that the disciples of Jesus are to be punching bags for any bully who comes along and allow themselves to be robbed blind by thieves. They think we are to passively permit violence and criminal activity to go unchecked and unrestrained. In times of war, we are forbidden to defend ourselves, our loved ones, and our country. This is most emphatically *not* what Jesus is saying.

No, the primary context here is *religious* persecution. The enemy Jesus speaks of is someone who hates you, excludes you, speaks evil of you, and assaults you for the sake of his name – precisely because you are a disciple of Jesus. *That* is the enemy whose evil is to be overcome by your good; not just any criminal who comes along and feels like beating you and taking away your stuff.

That having been established, it's still a pretty high bar that Jesus sets for us. In the midst of religious persecution – which in our culture and time we really haven't experienced much of but is certainly on the rise – it's hard to be so caring and concerned for those who hate and attack you. But Jesus doesn't give us an option. He tells us that we *must* love our enemies. And that doesn't mean that we have to have warm, fuzzy feelings of affection for them. Rather, it's an attitude of service. It's seeking their good. It's meeting their needs. And well we should: if they hate you because you confess the name of Jesus, then they are in the dark. They're lost. They're condemned, under the wrath of God, and are heading to hell. As a child of the light, you can't wish that on anyone.

So it's only right that you would treat such a person with kindness, that you would answer their hostility with words of peace and gentleness, that you would pray for their conversion to the truth, and that you would endure their assaults without seeking revenge. So doing you put them to shame for their evil behavior. You show them how baseless is their hatred and how untrue their accusations. And that, in turn, can help win them for the truth.

I read a lot of religious articles online. And invariably, in the comment sections that follow, there will be a lot of discussions going on between believers and those who are hostile to our Christian faith. It always grieves me to see how quickly these exchanges sink to insults and name calling, sometimes even to expressions of hope that terrible things will befall an adversary. We can expect this from the unbelievers. But when those who confess Christ act the same way, it only feeds and justifies the hatred on the other side.

Christ commands that we overcome such evil with good. We are not to judge them. That's God's job. We are not to condemn them. They do not know any better. We are called to a higher standard. The trouble is that the standard Christian rarely lives up to the Christian standard.

Let me suggest that we try different approach. When one enters the military, you begin with what's called basic training. And it really is basic. They teach you how to stand, how to march, how and who to salute, how to fold your socks, make your bed, wear your uniform, shine your shoes, and a thousand other things. It doesn't make any difference how you did these things before, in basic training you learn to do it the military way and everybody does it the same. To ... um ... *help* you learn these things, they've got what are called Drill Instructors. These are the guys who get in your face and assist you by telling you how things should be done properly and by critiquing you (often loudly and colorfully) when you make mistakes. By the end of basic training, your Drill Instructors will have you performing to the military standard.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus can be seen as acting like our Drill Instructor. He's telling us exactly what he expects of us. It's not what we are to think of as a lofty, unreachable goal; no, this is the Christian standard.

But a good Drill Instructor does more than teach and make corrections. He also models the very standards that he demands. He walks right, wears his uniform right, and folds his socks the military way. He does everything the same way he tells his trainees to do them so that they see in him how it is done. And Jesus is a good Drill Instructor. The very best.

When we were his enemies, he loved us. When we were evil and rebelled against him, he did us good. When he was being cursed, he blessed. When he was stripped bare, he gave away his clothes and did not ask for them back. He offered his face and his back to those who

beat him. When he was being crucified, he prayed for the forgiveness of those who crucified him.

By God's abounding mercy, we live in that blood bought forgiveness. We have the Light of God's saving truth. Let us walk in the Light. Let's live the Christian standard, confessing our sins when we fail to meet them, and by the Spirit striving ever more to achieve and maintain them.

And let's recognize also that a standard is not just a list of instructions or way of doing things. No, in a military organization, a standard is also the flag or banner that identifies the unit. In the Christian Church – the Church militant on earth – that standard is the cross: the cross on which the Lord Jesus died to save us, the cross that he has called us to bear in his name. In these days when we are increasingly facing the hostility of the world so opposed to our Christian faith and values, let us bear the Christian standard according to the standards Christ taught us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!