

Lift High the Cross

In the name of him who is our Light and Salvation, dear friends in Christ: In his Sermon on the Mount our Lord Jesus remarked, “People do not light a lamp and then put it under a basket. Instead they put it on a stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.” That’s obvious. It doesn’t make a lick of sense to light a lamp so that you can see and then cover it up so that you’re still in the dark; but then, Jesus was not talking about the fundamentals of interior lighting and design. He was talking about putting what it is that shines God’s divine Light on our world’s darkness where it can have maximum effect. And to apply the principle directly to his listeners he went on to say, “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

Now, it happens that lot of Christians hear that and think, “Ah, what Jesus wants is for us to go around doing good deeds so that people can see his light shining in us. That will bring glory to his Father.” And so, to fulfill what they’ve been commanded to do, they set out to make a good impression. They understand Christianity as a religion primarily of doing the will of God and bringing glory to him by doing good deeds and showing love for neighbors and enemies alike through acts of kindness and charity. And they understand that it’s important to make the biggest splash possible and get some publicity while doing such things so that people can see the good deeds, for if they fail to do so, it would be like putting their light under a basket. And that seems to make perfect sense, doesn’t it? I mean, how are people going to see the light of our good deeds unless we put them up on a stand? Isn’t that what Jesus told us to do?

I suspect that most of you have that funny feeling that tells you I’m about to say, “No, that isn’t what Jesus told us to do – it’s not even close”; but if that’s the case, can you tell me why? Do you know what’s wrong with this line of reasoning?

Well, first things first: let’s establish that it really is wrong. How do we know that for sure? The easiest way is to read a little farther in the same sermon where Jesus says, “Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward with your Father in heaven.” He goes on to command his followers to keep their acts of charity a secret. “When giving to the needy”, he said, “don’t even let your left hand know what your right is doing.” So not only are we to hide our good deeds from the eyes of other people, we are to hide them from ourselves. Now, either Jesus has some kind of attention deficit disorder that causes him to issue completely conflicting instructions in the course of the same sermon or (and let me suggest this is a whole lot more likely) there’s a problem with the view of Christianity I have laid out.

What’s the problem? The fallacy is that the light of Christ that’s supposed to shine forth from you is the good deeds *you* perform. What he said was, “Let your *Light* shine”, that is, put your Light on the stand, and “*then* people will see your good deeds and give glory to the Father.” The deeds are not the light. The light is what makes it possible for them to be seen. Well, okay, if good deeds are not the light, what is? What is it that’s supposed to shine forth from our lives? That’s easy: it’s the Light of the world; the Savior, Jesus Christ. That’s what – or rather *who* – the Father wants people to see. That’s what he raises up for all mankind to see. The light is not what you do for Christ; it’s what Christ has done for you.

This truth is illustrated perfectly in today's Old Testament lesson. We're back with Moses and the Children of Israel wandering in the desert. At this point they're on the home stretch, just a few weeks away from entering the Promised Land after 40 years of living in the wilderness. They're pretty excited. Hopes are high. But something came up so that they had to take a detour, and they found out the trip was going to take a few days longer than they thought. That little disappointment sets them off. God's people go into full scale rebellion against him, repeating the same old mantra that helped get them sentenced to 40 years of wandering in the desert in the first place. "Why did you bring us out here to die? We have no bread! We have no water! And we're sick to death of this stinking manna we have to eat!"

It's remarkable how short sighted and ungrateful people can be. Forty years of desert wandering, and in all that time not a single person has died of either thirst or starvation. The Lord has graciously ensured that they have had life's necessities every single day – without, I might add, having to do any real work themselves except for picking it up off the ground where the Lord served it to them. And though I suppose that it makes sense that they were growing weary of the manna, it is the food that's kept them alive all these years. To be sure, for anyone under 40, which is the vast majority of them, it's the only food they've ever known (other than the quail the Lord sends them from time to time). Certainly they could endure just a few more days of it. But no, they've been frustrated by the delay and they allow their impatience to overflow into a temper tantrum of biblical proportions. In response, the Lord sends some snakes to help them regain a proper perspective – sort of like a parent who tells a whiny child to stop complaining "or give you something to cry about". That strategy works quite well, and soon the people are repenting of their sin and praying for the removal of the snakes. Now, here's what's key: the Lord doesn't take away the snakes. Instead, he gives the people a cure for snakebite. He has Moses raise up a bronze snake on a pole. Then whenever someone was bitten all he had to do was to look up at that bronze snake, and he lived.

Two things to highlight here: first that the snake was an *object* for the people's faith. It's not reasonable that just looking at a piece of bronze could cure snakebite. And if some bitten person dug in his heels and said, "This is dumb. I'm not about to go look at that stupid snake because there's no way it can help", well, that person died. It took a little faith – and very little at that – in the word and promise of God to look at that snake. Even the person who said, "I'm dying here. I guess it's at least worth a try" displayed a tiny mustard seed sized amount of faith; but that was enough. Looking, he lived. Second, we want to note that the snake was raised up where it could be seen. It was like that lamp on a stand Jesus was talking about. It was lifted up above people's heads so that it would be a point of focus and so it could be seen at a distance. It's what God wanted his people to see to be saved.

Now, fast-forward to today's Gospel in which Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Clearly Jesus is speaking of his work on the cross for our salvation, the atonement he would make for the sins of the world. The thing to understand is that all the same ideas apply. Here we are in the world, rebels against God, and every one of us is dying of the venom of sin – the end of which is not just death, but eternal death in hell. We cannot cure ourselves. So we cry out to the Lord for deliverance, "Take these temptations and the sinful inclination of our hearts away." The Lord responds in mercy; but instead of taking away the problems we face, he provides a means of salvation that removes the dire consequences of sin. He sends his Son to suffer those consequences for us, to be damned and cursed like we and the serpent who deceived our first parents and who still deceives us deserve. He does this by being raised up on a cross to be first an object of faith – that anyone who looks and who sees the Savior suffering and dying and believes "He did that for me" lives eternally. Secondly, he is

raised up so that he will be seen. In raising Christ Jesus on the cross God is telling us, "This is what I want you to look at. Focus on this and what Christ accomplished here. This is your Light. This is the Light you are to see yourself and everyone else by." So that now, whenever we feel the bite of the snake, when the venom of guilt is burning and the fear of death and judgment seize us, all we have to do is look to the cross, and looking, we live.

It seems such a simple concept, the idea that the Christian Church must first, foremost, and always lift up high Christ and him crucified as God's solution to all that ails us. Unfortunately, it's been the bane of the church of all ages, and probably even more so today, that Christians will do just about anything to avoid it. We really don't like looking at Jesus on the cross. Though it's our daily bread that we need to live, it soon becomes the tired old manna we're so sick of. There are a lot of reasons for this, but today I'd like to consider what I think to be the two most threatening for the church of our time. The first is this: we don't like to lift high the cross of Christ because it says "absolutely no" to any contribution we might make to our salvation. There's no room on that cross for me, for my share, my help, my decision, my anything. The work is all his. All I can do is look at what *he* did.

This doesn't sit well with our prideful hearts that want so much to have some part to play. I want God to appreciate me for what *I* do too. And one of the more popular ways this is done is to put the idea of my sinful self in the past tense. *I was* a sinful person, but *I was* saved. *I came* to Christ. *I was* baptized. *I was* confirmed. Whatever. At some point of time in the past, I had to look at the cross and see what Christ did; but I've moved beyond that now. Now it's my goal to live as a Christian – to let the light of my works shine, as it were. "Thank you Jesus for what you did; I'll take it from here." Such a view overlooks the fact that my sinful nature and the snakes are all still very much a part of my life. And through our sins we get bitten again and again each day. We must continue to lift high the cross because the day I think I can live without looking at it is the day that my soul dies.

A second way we can be tempted to avoid having to lift high the cross of Christ that's widely practiced today is to engage in what's called Gospel reductionism. What happens is that we focus our attention on the passages that speak of God's grace and love and quickly skip past those verses that speak of his wrath and judgment against sin. We think, "Because God loves us, all those passages that speak of judgment have been superseded." Reinhold Niebuhr, an influential theologian of the last century once said, "Christians in America would like to believe in a God without wrath that saves a world without sin through a Christ without the cross." He was right. The problem we have with the cross is that it shows us that God thinks our sin is very serious business indeed. We'd rather pretend that it's not such a big deal. We'd rather laugh it off, offer excuses, or imagine that God understands. "Hey, nobody's perfect and God knows it; but he also knows that deep down I'm a good person who's trying the best I can."

One of the best examples of how this happens appears in today's Gospel lesson which includes what is many people's favorite verse, John 3:16, which says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The verse has been called the Bible in a nutshell. Based on that, a lot of Christians think, "Well, if that sums it up, what else do I need to know?" It's a fine case that shows how it is that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. Armed only with this verse – lifted out of its context – people start spouting trite expressions like, "Smile, God loves you" or what many of you know to be the one that really gets under my skin, "God hates the sin, but he loves the sinner".

What's wrong with these expressions? They're incomplete. They are both a gospel, that is, a kind of "good news" which do not include Christ and the cross. They are, therefore,

not really the true Gospel at all. The fact is that if you are not looking at the cross, by which I mean trusting in the one who suffered and died for you there, then you are outside of God's grace, mercy, and love. You are instead the object of his eternal wrath and condemnation. God loves you *only in Christ crucified*. God loves sinners only when for Christ's sake he doesn't see them as sinners but rather as the righteous in Christ. If you want to know how God feels about sinners, look at the cross and see what suffering he inflicted upon Jesus whom he treated as the sinner for you. Only then can you see how much God loves you.

Sometimes I watch cooking competition shows on TV. They've got a lot of them now, some for trained professional chefs to square off against each other and others for amateurs and self-taught home cooks. Anyway, what they'll do is present the competitors with a challenge: prepare the best plate of food you can within a certain amount of time. The winner is determined by a panel of judges who are usually a mix of celebrities and culinary experts. It's interesting to see what the cooks can come up with, what creativity they display. But there's usually a catch: all the dishes have to include and highlight a particular ingredient. It could be anything: some kind of meat or fish, a certain vegetable, or who knows what. All the dishes have to have it as the star. And if a dish doesn't feature the theme ingredient, it doesn't matter how delicious it is; it doesn't count.

We can borrow the basic concept and apply it to what we do here in the church together, as well as to what we do in our individual lives as Christians. Whatever we do, whatever we think or say, if it doesn't include the cross, if it doesn't lift up Christ and him crucified, then it doesn't count. It doesn't make any difference how beautiful, thoughtful, or glorious something appears. Without the cross, it's worse than worthless. This speaks to our worship, our hymns, how we work and interact with each other, everything in our lives. Only that which is seen in the Light of the cross will endure.

And that brings us back to where we started, with the question of our good deeds and where they fit in. The answer is that apart from the cross, they don't. But when we let our Light shine, that is, when we show forth our faith in Jesus Christ crucified, when we lift him up on the cross and he remains our Light and focus, then the good deeds that Christ works through us will naturally follow – good deeds that we will largely be unaware of. Our left hands won't even know what the rights are doing. But others will see; and it will be seen plainly that what we have done has been done through God. To him be our praise and thanks forever through Christ Jesus our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!