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The First Sunday in Lent

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HOW TO KEEP A HOLY LENT

This is a tricky proposition. We aspire to live holy lives, although we do not, nor do we really expect to. And so when we ask for the grace to walk "in holiness and righteousness all our days," we realize that whereas God shall be faithful, we will not always be so.

It is the character of the human condition, even as Christians, that we are sinners yet to be made perfect. Yes, we have been reconciled to God through his Son, but we are actually now still quite imperfect. Martin Luther said rightly that we are, "simul justus et peccator" at once justified and a sinner. We are growing into holiness. We have not attained it.

How then does one grow in holiness? Lent is a wonderful time to concentrate on this. Self-reflection and self-examination are our beginning. But these activities of the self are only preliminary states of mind leading to holiness. We must remember this fact: holiness is not the perfecting of the image we have of ourselves. To grow in holiness is to come closer to God. As we come closer to him we are remade in his image.

And so the question remains how we do this. One answer, recently discussed in our Bible Class, comes from the Sermon on the Mount. Towards the end of the sermon, St. Matthew puts before us the character of the kingdom of God in three sets of twos; two gates, two trees, and two foundations.

Each of these contrasting pairs shows us the exclusive call of the kingdom and who it is that is calling. The gate is narrow that leads to life and there are few who find it. A good tree can only produce good fruit and a bad tree bad fruit. And finally, whoever would build his house upon the rock will both hear the words of the Lord Jesus and do them.

In each case one is struck by our responsibility. Entering the gate, producing the fruit, building upon the rock, these are choices and habits that we cultivate as followers of Christ.

And yet there is something that we need to be careful of here, and that is the dreaded sin of spiritual pride. Do we really think that in and of ourselves we are able to do this? Have we not proven to ourselves over and over again that there really is "no health in us?" How should one understand spiritual growth into holiness?

Well the spiritual masters are much better with this than I am. And even those thematic workbooks that are now so popular throughout the various Christian churches have many good things to say. But perhaps it is not too far off to propose that within the Sermon on the Mount itself, there is the remedy for spiritual pride and further clarity on the two gates, the two trees, and the two foundations.

I am thinking of these now in broad strokes, but in strokes nonetheless. The whole structure of this great sermon of our Lord depends upon the beatitudes with which he begins. These are the spiritual substance of the Kingdom of God, and they never cease to be elements of the spiritual life. The blessedness of the beatitudes is realized only partly in this life. They are fulfilled in their wonder and joy in the life to come.

And so to be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, and so on, these are the character of what it means to be a Christian, which are never absent and are in reality essential. Whenever one thinks, therefore, of the two gates, or the two trees, or the two foundations, it ought not to be supposed that the narrow path, or the good fruit, or the stable foundation of rock is without these spiritual realities of blessedness. To be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, these are, in fact, what Jesus knows we must have and be, if we are to enter God's kingdom, and produce truly good works, and build the houses of our souls.

If we can make this beginning with our Lord, then we are at a better point to understand the exclusiveness of the Kingdom, rather than trusting in our ability to choose and cultivate spiritual habit.

When Jesus tells us that our righteousness must be greater than that of the Scribes and Pharisees, we look elsewhere than to our own souls. We take no real confidence in our ability to live the Christian life. We are able to say with sure conviction each time we offer our confession, "There is no health in us."

And so how is it finally that we shall indeed enter the narrow gate, and produce fruit, and build the interior castle? Well it is from the first and to the last in Christ Jesus himself.

There really is no spiritual life, understood in Christian terms, apart from life in him. He is the author and finisher of our faith, because of who he is and what he does. He is just and the justifier of those who trust him.

After all he himself is the gate, what St. John calls the door of the sheep, through which we find the abundant pasture of his kingdom. And he is the vine, as St. John again speaks of him, that vine which alone is able to sustain the branches, and even to prune them to bear all manner of fruit. And he is the one foundation, what St. Peter calls the chief cornerstone, from which the whole building of the Church derives its structure and strength.

St. Matthew speaks of these things in the terms of obedience, but it is an obedience that must be greater than that of the Scribes and Pharisees, and one that depends upon God from the very first moment. This is who Jesus was and what he did. He did always what he saw the Father do, and he spoke always the words he heard from

his Father. While he did not sin, he was poor in spirit, he mourned for the sins of the world and he was altogether meek. He was utterly dependent on his Father.

Dependence such as this is what it means to be poor in spirit, humbly supplicating the Lord for every spiritual morsel that he, in his tender mercy, will provide us spiritual beggars. It is the poor in spirit who are willing to mourn for their sins and the sins of others. It is these same who become meek, absent of spiritual pride and capable of receiving all the goodness that God gives. The spiritual life of the beatitudes which grows evermore toward perfection in Christ in heaven is the beginning now, the essence of true spirituality, the character of the Kingdom of God, what it means to pass through the narrow gate, to bear good fruit, and to build one's soul on the truth of Jesus' words.

This Lent and always, the way to become holy is the way of humility. For we might cast out demons in his name, and do miraculous works in his name, and preach so beautifully in his name, but he will not know us on that great day, if we do not share his humility. And even so, we shall not do this perfectly. We shall truly need his mercy, and when we do, and ask for it, we who are poor will be made rich, and having come closer to God we shall be more like him.

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