

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Ninth Sunday after Trinity¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Chapter of The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel.³

“Then came certain of the elders of Israel unto me, and sat before me. And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Son of Man, these men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumbling block of iniquity before their face: should I be enquired of at all by them? Therefore speak unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Every man of the house of Israel that setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to the prophet; I the Lord will answer him that cometh according to the multitude of his idols; That I may take the house of Israel in their own heart, because they are all estranged from me through their idols.

“Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; Repent, and turn *yourselves* from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations. For every one of the house of Israel, or of the stranger that sojourneth in Israel, which separateth himself from me, and setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to a prophet to inquire of him concerning me; I the Lord will answer him by myself: And I will set my face against that man, and will make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of my people; and ye shall know that I am the Lord. And if the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the Lord have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel. And they shall bear the punishment of their iniquity: the punishment of the prophet shall be even as the punishment of him that seeketh *unto him*; that the house of Israel may go no more astray from me, neither be polluted any more with all their transgressions; but

²⁰ I Thessalonians 4:9-12.

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that they may be my people, and I may be their God, saith the Lord God.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the First Epistle of the Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians.⁴

“Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort *you* by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, *so* ye would abound more and more. For ye know what commandments we Give you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, *even* your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: That no *man* go beyond and defraud his brother in *any* matter: because that the Lord *is* the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit. But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more; And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and *that* ye may have lack of nothing.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

particular to our Christian fellows, and on how our fulfilling those duties is part of our Christian vocation.

Conclusion:

So there, in a nutshell, we have St. Paul’s recipe for holiness: first fulfill our duties to God, and in particular our duty to exercise proper control over our physical selves, and then fulfill our duties to our neighbors, and in particular our duty to treat them with the consideration and respect due to those who are loved by God just as much as we ourselves are.

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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Mass on the Second Sunday in Lent, 2012.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxx (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Ezekiel 14:1-11 (KJV).

⁴ I Thessalonians 4:1-12 (KJV).

⁵ The RSV gives “in this matter” as its principal reading, where the context would seem to connect “this matter” with the taking of a wife, but with the alternative of “in business”, which correlates with the KJV’s reading, “in any matter”.

⁶ I Thessalonians 4:3, 5-6 (RSV).

⁷ I Thessalonians 4:7 (RSV).

⁸ *Article IX “Of Original or Birth-Sin”*, The Articles of Religion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 604 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁹ Romans 1:7 (RSV).

¹⁰ I Corinthians 1:2 (RSV).

¹¹ II Corinthians 1:1 (RSV).

¹² II Kings 24:13 & 25:9-17; II Chronicles 36:7, 19.

¹³ Dan 5:2-3.

¹⁴ Ezra 1:7-11.

¹⁵ I Thessalonians 4:2 (RSV).

¹⁶ I Thessalonians 4:3, 5-6 (RSV).

¹⁷ I Thessalonians 4:3b (RSV).

¹⁸ I Thessalonians 4:4 (RSV), note x.

¹⁹ I Thessalonians 4:6a (RSV), note c.

not know God; [and] that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things....”¹⁶

First, Paul directs that we “abstain from unchastity....”¹⁷ By this, he certainly means that we are to maintain purity in sexual affairs and this is something the Church has always taught. However, from his overall context, it is reasonable to presume that he means more than just reining in our progenerative instincts, and that by “lust” he means also the powerful call of all those bodily urges that God gave to us to enable us to live in this physical world but that are so very subject to the seductive lure of excessive indulgence.

Thus an alternative rendering of one of these Verses is “that each one of you know how to control his own body....”¹⁸ And because “God ... gives his Holy Spirit to [us]” in order to enable us to meet His standards of sanctification, maintaining purity is, in fact, a religious duty. Nor should that surprise us when we remember that one of the lures much pagan worship extended to its devotees was a strong component of sexual license. Thus to indulge in pagan sexual behavior is, in the end, to worship pagan gods, by adopting their permissive admonitions, rather than to serve the Judeo-Christian God, by obeying His injunctions.

So the very first principle of holiness is to exercise our God-given will and intellect to control our bodies and their desires, not to let them control us. This is what the ancient pagan philosophers called “the Cardinal Virtue of temperance” and it is one we should always keep firmly before us.

The second head of Paul’s outline of holiness is “that no man transgress, and defraud his brother in business...”¹⁹ The final four Verses of today’s Second Lesson²⁰ expand on this as the opening example of our duties to others, and in

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[T]his is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity; ... not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; [and] that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in [any]⁵ matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things....”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Introduction:

The “long green season” of Trinity is one of the times in the Christian year when each of us is supposed to take stock of the requirements of the Christian life, to assess his or her personal progress in that life, and to take appropriate steps to improve his or her performance in that regard. One of the most important aspects of that Christian life is what we call *holiness*. This is sometimes called *perfection*—I hasten to say that means “perfection” in the sense of a process that is still ongoing, not “perfection” in the sense of a state that has already been attained—and is the subject of the discipline we call *ascetics*.

In today’s Second Lesson, St. Paul makes explicit reference to this requirement of holiness, for he says: “God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness.”⁷

Theme:

At first hearing, this tends to startle us. We may ask ourselves, “What does he mean, ‘God has called us in holiness’?” Our surprise, or at least our discomfort, is natural, for we are all too aware that our personal dispositions and behavior are far from holy. We are also probably aware of our natural state of unholiness, to which the Articles of Religion refer when they tell us that we are “very far gone from original righteousness and [are of our] own nature inclined to

evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit....”⁸

Development:

The answer to that conundrum lies in one word in St. Paul’s statement. Notice that he said we are “*called* in holiness”, he did not say that we have “attained holiness”. Holiness is our *calling* or *vocation*, it is the goal toward which we should always be striving, but it is in no way our current state of being. Put quite simply, our manner of daily living falls far short of our holy calling, but that shortcoming in no way diminishes the importance of holiness as our aspiration and our destiny.

If you find this dichotomy confusing, just remember how St. Paul directed so many of his Epistles. Thus to the church at Rome, his address was “To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints....”⁹ Of particular interest are his addresses to the Church at Corinth: “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...”¹⁰ and “To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia [*uh-KAY-yuh*]....”¹¹

But what are these words, “saints” and “sanctified”? How can Paul use these terms to describe the Corinthians when the whole purpose of those two letters was to admonish, in the most uncertain terms, those very people for some very unholy, unsanctified behavior? They were tolerating incest and adultery in their midst, wallowing in pride and envy, and indulging in gossip and factional feuding. How could he have described people who were actively engaged in such things as “saints”?

As I suggested before, he could do so because he was very well aware of the important distinction between *aspira-*

tions and *attainments*. To understand this, let us reflect for a moment upon the vessels which were used by the Old Testament Jewish priests in the worship of the Temple. These utensils were “holy” because God had specified their type, number, and design, and because they had been dedicated to His service. Yet these holy objects were treated blasphemously when Nebuchadnezzar seized them and carried them off to Babylon,¹² where Belshazzar put them to profane use at his secular feasts.¹³

However, this disrespectful use did not change the fact that these were holy objects because they had been consecrated to God and His service. Instead, the profanation reflected not on the holy things themselves but upon the sinful men who disregarded those vessels’ holy status. And, ultimately, that holiness was acknowledged when the Persian emperor Cyrus returned them to Ezra to be restored to the Temple and its worship,¹⁴ so those utensils were returned to their intended use in God’s service.

In the same way, once we have been dedicated to God and His service, we are “sanctified”, that is, “made holy”, and, as such, are “saints” or “holy ones”. Like the Temple vessels, we may put ourselves to uses that are far from holy, but the fault of that is with us when we decide to disregard that holy vocation, not with that vocation itself. And, like those vessels, even when, for a time, we disregard that holy destiny, we can always return to our “highest and best use”.

So how are we to live up to that vocation of holiness, to which we were each dedicated by our baptisms? Today’s Second Lesson is far from a complete textbook of ascetics but St. Paul gives us at least an outline when he refers to the “instructions [he] gave ... through the Lord Jesus.”¹⁵ And he summarizes these instructions under two heads: “[T]his is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity; ... not in the passion of lust like heathen who do