

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYERⁱ
Quinquagesima Sundayⁱⁱ

Lessons:ⁱⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the nineteenth Chapter of the Third Book of Moses, called Leviticus.^{iv}

“And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy.

“...

“And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest. And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the LORD your God.

“Ye shall not steal, neither deal falsely, neither lie one to another.

“And ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the LORD.

“Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbour, neither rob him: the wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee all night until the morning.

“Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumblingblock before the blind, but shalt fear thy God: I am the LORD.

“Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour.

“Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbour: I am the LORD.

“Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him.

“Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the First Epistle General of St. John.^v

“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world. Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error. Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love him, because he first loved us. If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

The subject of faith and good works has been very important throughout the history of the Church, and it was especially important during the Sixteenth Century in the various forms taken by the Reformation. It was no less a burning issue in England than anywhere else. Nonetheless, most people tend to think of Martin Luther when the subject comes up, and his alleged dislike of the Epistle of James.

In fact, Luther did not call the Epistle of James an “epistle of straw” exactly. Rather he wrote:

“St. John’s Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul’s Epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and St. Peter’s Epistle-these are the books which show to thee Christ, and teach everything that is necessary and blessed for thee to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book of doctrine. Therefore, St. James’ Epistle is a perfect straw-epistle compared with them, for it has in it nothing of an evangelic kind.” (Preface to the New Testament)

That is, he thought it was of less importance.

Now, I do not think we need dwell on that, for he was not suggesting that anyone should fail to read all of Scripture. Nonetheless, to this day people contend that between St. Paul and St. James a great gulf is set in place, a barrier of disagreement too wide to traverse. So, we need to read carefully the passages in question, always remembering that the invisible hand that authored Scripture was Almighty God, the Holy Spirit opening the eyes and minds of the several writers with the revelation of God’s holy word. Therefore, no genuine contradiction can exist in the doctrine of those writers.

Works of the Law and works of faith

The most significant passages are the third chapter of Paul’s Epistle to the Church in Rome, and the second chapter of James’ General Epistle. Let us begin with St. Paul:

“Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.”^{vi}

In this passage St. Paul is talking about works of the Law. Writing about our tenth Article of Religion, I said this, which begins by quoting a part of the Article:

“The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith and calling upon God.

“Is this telling us not to prepare ourselves, or not to do good works? Read that way it can provide an excuse for laziness and disobedience to the commandments of God. On the contrary, we would sin by not doing these things. But even our performance of them, were it the best we possibly could do, could not make us righteous....

“It would all look completely hopeless if we did not have the second sentence of this brief Article.

“Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us that we may have a good will, and working with us when we have that good will.

“There we see that word, ‘grace.’ That is the whole difference. However good our good works may be, God’s standard

of ‘good’ is too high for even our best efforts. Righteousness by His true and perfect standard exceeds our reach. We cannot achieve it. That is not because His standard is unjust. In fact, it is because His standard is just, in fact *perfectly* just. This is why no one can understand the doctrine of grace unless and until he understands Original Sin.”

It is, as Paul said, “by the law is the knowledge of sin.” That is, in the work of the great Physician of souls, the Law is diagnostic. As Paul said to the Galatian Church, “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”^{vii}

It all boils down to the fact that justification is a gift given, not a reward earned. St. John tells us in today’s Second Lesson: “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”^{viii} It would be hopeless if not for the grace of God: “But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.”^{ix}

So, when works of the Law are good and commendable it is only by the grace of God in Christ. On their own, works of the Law come up short, failing to meet God’s perfect standard. Works of the Law do not justify. Such good works are not weighed against sins to see which is heavier on the Day of Judgment. They are commanded and must be done; but are not counted or weighed against sins in some eternal ledger. Only the blood of Christ cancels out sin. The Law does not justify, for that is not its purpose.

But it appears at first glance that James contradicts Paul.

“What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew [SHOW] me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew [SHOW] thee my faith by my works.”^x

After citing examples from the Old Testament, such as Abraham & Rahab, James comes right out with the most direct line of all that seems to contradict Paul: “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.”^{xi}

So, which is right? Is it Paul, who says, “a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law”? or James who says, “by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.” Both men are right, both agree, for both were inspired to write their doctrine by the Holy Spirit who guided them in what to say. Paul spoke of works of the Law, and James spoke of works of faith. Paul explained that the Law cannot make anyone righteous, but that only faith can justify; and James explained that faith is evident by works. If we find a passage that sums up what both men were saying, in full agreement, it from Paul’s Epistle to the Church in Ephesus:

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”^{xii}

Paul, again, to the Galatians: “For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.”^{xiii} And, to the Corinthians, “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”^{xiv} “Faith without works is dead, being alone.... For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also,” James tells us. This works well with Paul’s doctrine, that faith is accompanied by love. James says that we show faith by our works, and Paul tells us that faith “works by love.”

A true believer, one who has faith in Christ, cannot live in that faith and not be changed by it. The fact that “we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them,” as Paul wrote, simply has to find expression in our lives. Where faith is, a person having been justified already, can be transformed by the Holy Spirit in day to day life.

Love of neighbor

The second great commandment, “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” comes with that piercing diagnosis. It is the Law. It reveals to each heart its own shortcomings and failure. But God gives us more grace even still, to live as John teaches us in today’s Epistle reading. We know that God loves us. How do we know that God loves us? Because He gave His Son to be the Propitiation for our sins. And, now we have been given a power to love God because He first loved us. And, because we can love God, we have that power to love our brother also.

The love that springs from a life of true faith, is due of course to the Holy Spirit: “The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.”^{xv} This love makes good works inevitable and spontaneous. A true believer simply cannot ignore the needs he encounters among people. Works of the Law count for nothing in terms of justification; works of faith, however, are a pleasing fruit of that faith, because that faith works by the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost.

The rich man who ignored the suffering of Lazarus, is lost, finally, because he did not hear the word of God: “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.” Had he heard the word of God and believed, could he have left Lazarus out there at his gate? Would not faith have worked by love? If the goats at the King’s left hand^{xvi} had the faith of those sheep at His right hand, could they have failed to do for “*one of the least of these*” His brethren?

These are among the issues that we will consider, Sunday by Sunday, throughout the second half of the Church year, which begins with Trinity Sunday. This Trinity season is very important for reasons I have said before:

“The Summary of the Law with the Two Great Commandments summarizes the Ten Commandments; we have two commandments and two tables. For, in the Ten Commandments we have the first Table, with four commandments

about loving God. Then we have the second table, with six commandments about loving your neighbor.

“In the middle of the Church Year we turn to the second table on this day. Up until now we have concentrated on the commandments to love the Lord thy God; now we look at the commandments that tell you, and me, *how* to ‘love thy neighbor as thyself.’

“Where, in all of that emphasis from Advent through Pentecost, do we concentrate on the commandments that tell us how to love God? It seems that the opposite is true. What we have seen is the proof that God loves us. Exactly so. This is what St. John tells us in the Epistle reading we have heard today: ‘We love him, because he first loved us.’”

“And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.”^{xvii}

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June 26, 2011

ⁱ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *This sermon was originally written on the Epistle at Mass on the First Sunday after Trinity, 2011.*

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

^{iv} *Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 (KJV).*

^v *I John 4:1-end (KJV).*

^{vi} *Rom. 3:19-28.*

^{vii} *Gal. 3:24.*

^{viii} *I John 4:10.*

^{ix} *I Cor. 1:30.*

^x *James 2:14-18.*

^{xi} *v. 24.*

^{xii} *Eph. 2:8-10.*

^{xiii} *Gal. 5:6.*

^{xiv} *I Cor. 13:13.*

^{xv} *Rom. 5:5.*

^{xvi} *Matt. 25:31-46.*

^{xvii} *I John 4:21.*

^{xviii} *Rector, St. Benedict's Anglican Catholic Church, Chapel Hill, NC.*