

BE FIXED ON LIFE, CHOOSE NOT DEATH!

The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany - Deuteronomy 30:15–20, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 5:21-37

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Grace, peace and mercy from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen!

I. INTRODUCTION

In our Old Testament lesson Moses is leading the children of God to the Promised Land. But they have become disgruntled and discontented. They have been grumbling and murmuring against Moses and against God. And Moses has had it. Moses calls them a stiffnecked people, they are stubborn and rebellious and he's tired of it. I can understand how Moses felt. But I can also understand how the people felt.

II. THE PEOPLE

The people were tired. They had been wandering through the wilderness for years. Back in Egypt they had homes, a roof over their heads, regular food in their stomachs. Yes, they were slaves. According to Pharaoh they owned nothing; everything they brought with them was now his. They worked for Pharaoh, some tended the flocks but others did the heavy manual labor. They survived by using their vocations, by their wits with their abilities.

Here in the wilderness they had to rely solely on God. They had to live day by day by God's grace, literally. For everyday God would drop manna from heaven. And they were instructed to gather only enough for each day. And God would provide drink, often water from a rock. They couldn't lean to their own understanding or use their own abilities for survival; they had to rely on God. No warm beds, no elaborate meals and no social pecking orders. They were in survival mode.

But it even gets worse. Moses kept talking about this Promised Land. But they never seemed to get close; it never seemed reachable, until one day when they did finally reach it. God commanded Moses to send men to spy out the land of Canaan. The heads of each tribe of Israel were sent to bring news back of what they saw. After 40 days the spies returned. The news they brought back was a blessing and curse. The land flows with milk and honey but the people are strong and the cities are well fortified. We see descendants of Anak there. Anak was the father of 3 giants. What they saw were giants, huge people, strong and violent people. Only Joshua and Caleb, who also spied out the land spoke up and said, "*We can take them! This is the land which God has promised, let us take possession.*" But the others had stirred up the people and spread a bad report about the land. The land is filled with giants who devour its inhabitants. We are like grasshoppers in their sight. So the people of Israel lifted up their voices and wept that night. Fear broke out, and the people began demanding a new leader, they grumbled against Aaron and Moses and said, "*If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! Would it not be better to return to Egypt?*"(Numbers 14:2-3).

The people became so enraged against Aaron and Moses that they wanted to stone them to death. So God spoke a curse against these men. None of those who had lived and seen the mighty power of God's hand would enter the Promised Land, instead they would die in the wilderness. For they leaned to their own understanding and they were not living by faith. Only Caleb and Joshua would ever enter the Promised Land and the children of this unworthy generation.

By the way, those heads of the tribes of Israel who had gone out as spies, who came and gave an ill report, who then spread the vicious and infectious disease of unbelief and fear, those men didn't die in the wilderness they were struck dead by a plague immediately before the Lord. I'm sure this served as a sign to God's people about how serious God was about His decree.

Well the people became irate with God's decree and wanted would not to heed His declaration. They realized they had sinned against God and Aaron and Moses. But rather than repent and be obedient to God's command they decided to lean to their own understanding and attack those people in the Promised Land. Moses tried to tell them it would fail. They had been victorious in other battles. But in those battles the Ark of the Covenant went with them, God's presence was with them. But this time they went into battle without out the Ark, without God's abundant blessing and presence. And they were utterly destroyed. These people lived in the in between times. Between the past captivity, slavery with its creature comforts and regular daily routine and the future promised paradise, which is so close, but still not reachable.

III. THE BLESSING AND CURSE

This provides the context we need to understand our text today. This generation of people in the "in between time" are now preparing to enter God's Promised Land. But some are still saying, "Let us go back to Egypt." Let's go back to bondage. But Moses says, "***See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore be fixed on life, that you and your offspring may live loving the LORD your God, obeying His voice and holding fast to Him.***" For Israel to go backwards is to choose death. To return to bondage is a guaranteed death sentence.

We too live in the "in between times". We live with our past, with our life experiences. We like Israel try to lean to our own understanding and sometimes even try to force God to act in a way that conforms to that understanding. In front of us is the Promised Land, the true land of milk and honey. We live between the bondage of the flesh and sin and the deliverance to the Promised Land of heaven.

We too, try to reach into our past to determine the future. We think that if somehow we can recapture something from the past, something from a previous time that we will be happier and more content. Usually it only leaves us grumbling and murmuring against others as to what life has given us. To us Moses also says: ***Therefore be fixed on life, that you and your offspring may live loving the LORD your God, obeying His voice and holding fast to Him.*** Don't worry about those things around you, don't hang on to some pipe dream of the past, be fixed on life, focus your eyes on God, love the Lord your God and obey His voice and lean not to your own understanding.

IV. ST. PAUL AND CORINTH

St. Paul must have felt like Moses when he wrote our Epistle Lesson for today. 1 Corinthians 3:1-3: ***But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?***

The Corinthians had a strong dose of grandiosity. They all felt they had some form of superiority based upon who baptized them or what spiritual gifts they had. They leaned to their own understanding and that brought division into the church at Corinth. They wanted everyone to agree with their position and their understanding.

I think it's safe to say that St. Paul was indeed a great man. Yet he says of himself, "***What is Paul?***" Simply servant though whom you believed. Not a man of great stature, not a great man by his own account, but simply a servant doing what God assigned him to do. Man gets in trouble when he has wrong understanding of himself.

The people of Israel in Deuteronomy and the Greeks of Corinth had a wrong understanding of themselves. They over estimated their righteousness and prestige by leaning to their own understanding. And because of that they spent years in the wilderness of turmoil. What about you?

V. CONCLUSION

Do you think that Moses and St. Paul writings don't apply to you? Let's see how spiritually mature we are and how little we lean to our own understanding. Let's take a look at how well we've done at keeping God's Perfect Law. From our Gospel lesson today: *Jesus said: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.* Have you been angry? Have you insulted or called another a fool?

Jesus says: *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.* Have you lusted, stolen a longing look at someone. What about divorce, are you innocent?

"Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil. Are your answer yes and no? Or do you use many words to justify your actions?

How did you do? Have you lived God's Law perfectly? No! Then repent and listen carefully to some additional news, the Good News. God knows you cannot! You can not live a perfectly sinless life. St. Paul says in Romans 3:23-24: *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."* He also says in Romans 6:23 says: *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* One more from St. Paul in Romans 5:8 *"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, enemies of God, Christ died for us."*

The reality is we are all sinners. We all have fallen short of God will and plan for our lives. We continue to lean to our own understanding and we cannot do a thing to change ourselves. And even worse we really don't want to change ourselves. Our Old Adam wants everything to remain the same. We want to be back in Egypt and remain in bondage. So what can we do? Proverbs 3:5 *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And do not lean on your own understanding.* And hear these words from St. John the 8th chapter: *"If therefore the Son set you free, you shall be free indeed.* (John 8:36).

And Jesus has set you free. By dying for all your sins and giving you credit for His perfect lived life and death. He paid the price with His blood. So be fixed on life, remain in life and choose not death. For Jesus declares to you today, all sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, you are set free, free indeed. In Jesus Name, amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN