

Luke 18.31-43
Quinquagesima
3 March 2019
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For He will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging Him they will kill Him, and on the third day He will rise.”

Jesus' very own words.

But if you don't, won't, can't or refuse to grasp Him at those words, you can have no part of Him.

Because Christian faith grasps not its own righteousness, but Christ's. That's the heart of the Gospel. In fact, that is the Gospel. Christ for me. Christ in my place. Christ's suffering the suffering of merit, not mine. Christ's death the death that counts, not mine. Christ's resurrection my victory over sin, death, and the devil's power. Christ everything, me nothing.

But you know how hard it is to grasp Christ that way—even for faith.

You know how hard it is in the midst of your own suffering to think that your own suffering doesn't somehow merit a big payday from God. That your faithfulness to the Lord ... your commitment to a holy life ... even in the face adversity ... doesn't somehow earn you *at least a few brownie points with the big Guy*. “If I've suffered like this, there must surely be a special place for me in heaven.”

But faith's job isn't to look at itself. Or at you.

Faith's job is to grasp Christ and place *Him*, not you, between yourself and the Judgment. Faith's job is

- To point to Jesus' suffering and say, “That's the suffering that counts.”
- To point to Jesus' death and proclaim, “That death is for me.”
- To point to Jesus' resurrection and believe and confess, “His resurrection—THAT, not *my life*, is my resurrection.”

Faith stakes its entire hope on nothing but the blood of Jesus and His righteousness. It stares down sin with that hope. In that hope it laughs off all suffering. And it looks death and grave straight in the face and cannot despair, because all it sees is Christ's empty grave and your death swallowed up in the victory of His resurrection.

But if it's hard even for faith to do that, imagine how hard it is for unbelief.

You don't have your Bibles right in front of you, but if you did you'd see the heading here in the Gospel of Luke. It says “Jesus foretells His death a *third time*.”

And scanning down the page you'd see that the Triumphal Entry of Jesus on Palm Sunday, just 1 week before His death, is coming up at breakneck speed.

Point is, Jesus' identification of His work and job. His calling out the center and heart of the Gospel—this isn't news to the disciples. They've heard it two times already. Two times! And this is the third! And they're already with Him on His way to Jerusalem to fulfill the Scriptures. But the natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him.

- Folly it is that one should suffer *for me*.
- Folly it is that the Son of God should die. In my place.
- Folly it is that God could so love the world that He'd give His only-begotten Son. And that that'd be it. That'd take care of it.

That that only-begotten Son of God who cannot suffer because He's God should suffer. And for me!

That that only-begotten Son of God should by His blood blot out all my sins. And there's nothing more for me to do!

That's a preaching and message that the natural man cannot receive. The spiritual authorities of Jesus' day couldn't receive it. They had their righteousness and life figured out an entirely different way. God was pleased with them because "they weren't like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, tax-collectors."

But even Jesus' disciples couldn't wrap their heads around it. Because it blew their entire conception of God out of the water—a God who forgives sin! And entirely gratuitously and only for the sake of Christ! And it blew their conception of themselves out of the water. It took all moral and eternal agency out of their hands. And placed all the responsibility in God's, who accomplishes it all in Christ alone.

You see, in the disciples' moral universe God handed out a balance sheet at birth, and on it was to be recorded all the good and evil they had done. And at the end of life, when the balance of the good was to the good, then you got what was coming to you. And vice versa.

But here Jesus delivers a preaching and a good bit of news that upsets the whole apple cart: "Everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. Wounds, stripes, and all. For He will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging Him they will kill Him, and on the third day He will rise. Not for Himself. But for you."

And the disciples couldn't grasp any of these things. And failing to grasp any of these things, they couldn't grasp Christ in faith.

Can you?

Can you let go even one minute all your moral calculation on why you must be good with God? Can you put aside even your church attendance as something that must mark you in God's eyes as good? And simply rest your entire faith in Jesus and Jesus alone?

If you can't, fellow-redeemed, what's coming in 50 days will be nothing more a tragedy and travesty of justice. Your celebration of Holy Week will be nothing but the mourning of a miscarriage of justice. It will leave you worse off than when you had begun. Because it'll only cement you in your balance sheet theology. You'll use it to validate your own righteousness.

So for the love of God, don't hear those words faithlessly. Like the disciples. Jesus' suffering death and wasn't a miscarriage of justice, just another brutally violent episode in a murderous history of mankind that stretching from Cain and Abel to today. An event they happened to be on the good side of because they didn't perpetrate it.

Instead, it was the Lord and God of heaven and earth executing His perfect justice in perfect mercy. The Innocent One dying for the many guilty that the many guilty might live. God Himself bound in death to free those bound in the chain of sin. Perfect mercy. And perfect justice.

Fellow-redeemed: if the Son of God had to shed His blood to redeem you from your sins—what kind of power do you think your moral balance sheet could ever have? If nothing more than such a perfect sacrifice for sin could expunge it, what great value could your herky-jerky righteous deeds ever have?

You know the answer. None.

That's what blind Bartimaeus knew and believed. And his faith stands in great contrast to the unbelief of the disciples. Jesus had shown them *from the Scriptures* what He must do. And they didn't, couldn't, wouldn't, refused to believe it. They stood in judgment over the Word of God.

But all blind Bartimaeus had to hear was that this One who was coming down the road—that this One was the Son of David. The promised Messiah! And instead of standing in judgment over God's Word, he let it speak.

And it's to that speech of the Old Testament prophets that he attached his faith. Here was the Son of David. The Messiah. And when the Messiah comes this is what will happen: good news will be proclaimed to the poor of spirit—those who have no righteousness of their own. Liberty will be proclaimed to those captive in their sin. Those oppressed by sin will be set free. And blind will recover their sight (Is 61.1-2 + Lk 4.18). All of it pure gift. And none of it requiring a balance sheet that shows things to the good.

And in this whole exchange between Bartimaeus and Jesus you get the entire picture of the Gospel—and of faith.

What Bartimaeus asks Jesus for is nothing short of a miracle. Even today, with all the technology we have and all the understanding of the brain and eyes and ocular nevers, no blind person has ever had their eyesight restored. You can't pay a doctor enough to do it—because the doctor can't do it.

Only Jesus can.

Likewise, what Jesus accomplishes on His holy cross is nothing short of a miracle. The forgiveness of sins is an impossible achievement. There's no one so righteous that he can offer a perfect death for sin perfectly. You couldn't pay anyone enough to do that—because no one can do it.

Only Jesus can.

And so blind Bartimaeus takes all his thoughts captive to the Word of God. If Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah, then this is what must happen: He *must* bring recovery of sight to the blind.

And so leaving aside all thought of himself and his worthiness or unworthiness, Bartimaeus just blurts out, "Have mercy on me!" And when Jesus asks him what he'd like, he holds Jesus to His prophetic Word: "Let me recover my sight." He's asking Jesus to keep His promise.

That's what faith does. It holds God to His promises in Scripture. It seeks Christ and God's mercy not according to any moral calculation. It knows no merit of its own. It doesn't make speeches about how it deserves what it has coming from God. It simply grasps Jesus at His promises. And holds Him to them.

And God's promise to you in His Scriptures is this: that by the death of Jesus He has put away all your sins. That by the resurrection of Jesus He has already opened up your grave on the Last Day. That by His ascension He has gone to heaven to prepare a place. For you. That if you have baptized into Christ, that meritorious death has been made over to you. That when you receive the Sacrament you don't get just bread and wine, but the very Body and Blood of Jesus that paid for your sins—and that payment is made yours! That when the called ministers of Christ Himself speak over your sin, "I forgive you," it's just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our Lord dealt with you Himself.

Why? Because the price of those precious words was paid in blood. In the blood of the Son of God and David's Son.

Amen.

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