

Psalm 51 Hebrews 9:11-15 St. John 8:46-59

A Joint Venture

In the Preface to his book, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, Jerry Bridges writes: “A farmer plows his field, sows the seed, and fertilizes and cultivates – all the while knowing that in the final analysis he is utterly dependent on forces outside of himself. He knows he cannot cause the seed to germinate, nor can he produce the rain and sunshine for growing and harvesting the crop. For a successful harvest, he is dependent on these things from God. Yet, the farmer knows that unless he diligently pursues his responsibilities to plow, fertilize, and cultivate, he cannot expect a harvest at the end of the season. In a sense he is in a partnership with God, and he will reap its benefits only when he has fulfilled his own responsibilities. Farming is a joint venture between God and the farmer. The farmer cannot do what God must do, and God will not do what the farmer should do.” He then goes on to add that “we can say just as accurately that the pursuit of holiness is a joint venture between God and the Christian. No one can attain any degree of holiness without God working in his life, but just as surely no one will attain it without effort on his own part. God has made it possible for us to walk in holiness. But He has given us the responsibility of doing the walking; He does not do that for us.”

As I was meditating on our Psalm for today, Psalm 51, it struck me that if God does not have mercy on me, if He does not erase my transgressions, if He does not purge me of my sinfulness, if He does not wash me, if He does not hide His face from my sins, if He does not blot out my iniquities, if He does not create in me a clean heart, if He does not renew a steadfast spirit within me, I do not have a snowball’s chance in the hot place of ever being holy in any way, shape or form. King David, the author of this Psalm, understood

this only too well. A man after God's own heart...a man who trusted God through some most trying trials...a man known as the friend of God...this man still succumbed to the power of sin and not only committed adultery with Bathsheba, but also tried to hush it all up by causing the death of her husband Uriah after finding out that she was pregnant with his child. King David had the same problem we all have...the problem of sin. And in verse 5 he says it all. "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." You see, ever since Adam and Eve doubted God's Word, listened to the father of lies and sinned through a blatant act of disobedience, sin has stained the lives of all succeeding generations. It is like a genetic flaw that has been passed on from parent to child ever since.

But right after sin first entered into our world, God promised to deal with it one day. In Genesis 3:15 He said to satan, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel." From that time on, God's people were on the lookout for this Seed that would deal the deathblow to the one who held us captive because of our sin. You see this yearning for a Deliverer especially in the later books of the Old Testament as the doctrine of the Messiah became more defined. But by the time we get to the New Testament, this hope had taken on the form of a political deliverer...a warrior king who would set them free from physical bondage, not spiritual bondage. And for this reason, as we read the Gospels, we witness the total befuddlement of God's people with regard to this Carpenter from Nazareth called Jesus, Who said and did things only God could say and do. You see, no one was expecting God Himself to show up, much less die the death of a criminal

in a way in which His own law deemed a sign of His disapproval...remember, the law stated that anyone hung on a tree was considered cursed.

So, because of this, the author of the book written specifically to the Hebrews (to the Jews) was at pains to clear the muddied theological waters, in a manner of speaking, especially with regard to the sacrificial system. In this masterpiece of theological portraiture the author endeavored to show that the promise of God to deal with sin was at first demonstrated in images that served as a foreshadowing of how He would one day fulfill His promise. The various images included the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, an event known as the Exodus, it included the law, and particularly the laws concerning the rituals pertaining to atonement for sin, and it also included the entrance into the Promised Land. But for the purpose of this sermon, we will confine ourselves to the sacrificial ritual concerning the yearly Day of Atonement...Yom Kippur, in Hebrew...

The Tabernacle was shaped very much like our nave. There were three main sections...the place of meeting, where the people would gather to bring their offerings and sacrifices...then there was a place behind a veil, hidden from general view...the holy place, where the priests would offer incense and perform various other day to day priestly duties...and then there was the area behind the second veil...the Holy of Holies, where the golden censer and the Ark of the Covenant were kept. Into this area, only the High Priest would enter once a year to offer the blood of a bull specifically sacrificed for this purpose...to atone for his own sins and for the sins of all the people.

But, the author argued, as this sacrifice had to be repeated year after year after year, it was clear that this was not the fulfillment of God's promise, but merely a foreshadowing of it...a picture, as it were, of something else that would be permanent...something that

would deal with sin once and for all, without the need for yearly repetition. His reasoning, as can be seen in his opening statements in chapter 10, was that if these sacrifices were sufficient in dealing with the problem of sin, would they not have ceased to be offered? As such they served rather as a reminder of sins every year...a reminder that the promise of God to crush the head of the serpent still lay in the future.

But when God Himself, in the incarnate form of Jesus, came as High Priest and entered, not into the earthly Holy of Holies, but into the Heavenly Holy of Holies...and not with the blood of a bull, but with His own blood...as a spotless sacrifice as a Man for the sins of Mankind...the promise was fulfilled once for all time. God Himself took care of the problem of sin permanently. As the author says in chapter 10:14, "For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified."

But, if you are even only half awake, you might notice that sin is still very much a problem in our world...not only for those who are not in Jesus, but also for those who are...for those who have, to use the language of Hebrews, drawn near to God with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having had their hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and their bodies washed with pure water. In spite of this sin still seems very much alive and well on planet earth.

But here the image of the farmer and his field serves to bring clarity to this muddle. Just as the farmer is responsible for plowing, sowing, fertilizing, cultivating, weeding and so on, and is yet dependent on God for the actual germination of the seed, for the rain and the sunshine, so too are we responsible for cultivating the holiness God has provided for us through Jesus. While it is true that God delivered us from bondage to Satan and sin through the death of Jesus on the cross and that He has poured out His Holy Spirit in our

lives to help us overcome temptation to sin, it is equally true that we need to deliberately appropriate and act out this provision as we strive to live in the light of what God has revealed to be acceptable behavior for those thus liberated. Just as a prisoner has to learn how to live life outside of the confines of the prison once he has been set free, so we have to learn how to live life in the freedom that is ours in Jesus. We are no longer enslaved to sin, St. Paul tells us in his Epistle to the Romans, and therefore sin should no longer dominate our thoughts and actions.

So, victory over sin is a joint venture in which God does what we could not do while we do what He has enabled us to do by setting us free from sin and by empowering us through His indwelling Spirit. Holiness is therefore living in the way God made and remade us to live. As such the pursuit of holiness is a process of transformation in which we consistently learn to conform to the will of God rather than the will of the world.

But why then do so many who claim to follow Christ live lives that are no different from those who make no such claim? If God has set us free from sin, why are we then so often defeated by it? Bridges lists three main reasons for this in his first chapter. The first is that we all too often “are more concerned about our “victory” over sin than we are about the fact that our sins grieve the heart of God.” As long as our focus remains on ourselves, we will continue to stumble because our concern is still wrapped up with self. What is needed is a commitment to walk in obedience to God based upon our relationship with Him. A way to illustrate this problem would be a spouse who is more concerned about the role they are to play in the marriage than simply striving to love the person they are married to. The focus is on the wrong person for the wrong reasons...

The second reason sin still dominates our lives as believers, is that we have somehow come to believe that faith is opposed to works...that the holiness of converted people is by faith only, and not at all by personal exertion, as Bishop Ryle put it. It sounds so pious to say that faith in Jesus is the root of all holiness...and it is partially true...but it is just as true to say that part of living out that gift of holiness is actively putting off our sinful ways and actively putting on new holy ways. That all requires effort on our part. To use the illustration of a marriage again, this would be like someone who gets married and then continues to live life as if they were still single...only concerned with their own personal happiness and needs and desires. No, married life demands that both spouses work hard to please the other. So, too as the Bride of Christ, we need to work hard at pleasing our Bridegroom...

The final reason for unremarkable Christian living, is that very few of us ever take sin seriously. I will never forget the first time the “F” word was used in a movie. Or, at least, the first time I ever heard it used in a movie. It was the 1975 Sydney Pollack thriller, *Three Days of the Condor*, starring Robert Redford, Faye Dunaway and Cliff Robertson. Right at the end of the movie...in the final...the Redford character blurts out the word. And the audience at the time, responded by walking out of the theatre. Now, today, no one even bothers. This may seem to be a silly illustration to you, but it does show us how easily we become accustomed to things we may once have regarded as unacceptable. We all tend to categorize sins – we think that some sins are worse than other sins – some are simply wrong while others can be tolerated. But Solomon warns us that it is those little foxes that eventually over time and if left unchecked and unchallenged will ruin the vineyard...the little things eventually desensitize us to the

point where we begin to turn a blind eye to the bigger things as well. No, sin is wrong not because it is big or little, but because God says it is wrong...and therefore any sin is offensive to Him (regardless of how we may categorize it)and should not be tolerated by those who claim to love Him. Again, think about a marriage in which one spouse continually and repeatedly offends their partner by simply playing down the fact that their behavior, regardless of how insignificant it may seem to them, is hurtful to the other. Such a relationship can hardly be described as 'loving'.

So, in application, if we are to do our part in the joint venture between God and ourselves in our personal pursuit of holiness, we will have to examine these three basic reasons for a lack of holiness on our part by answering three basic questions. Are you ready for this? Here we go. Ask yourself: "Will you begin to look at sin as an offense against a holy God, instead of a personal defeat only?" Second, "Will you begin to take personal responsibility for your sin, realizing that as you do, you must depend on the grace of God" to help you actively transform your thoughts and deeds in keeping with what God has revealed to be His will in His Word? And then finally, "will you decide to obey God in all areas of life, however insignificant the issue (may seem to be to you)?"

God has called every one of His followers to a holy life. There are no exceptions to this call. This call to a holy life is based on the fact that our God is Himself holy and because He is holy, He requires that we be holy. But it is only as we see (God's) holiness, His absolute purity and moral hatred of sin, that we are gripped by the awfulness of our own sin against Him. To be gripped by that fact, Bridges says, is the first step in our pursuit of holiness.

And I believe that one of the places where we may see the awfulness of sin is right here at our Lord's Table. Because of God's absolute purity and moral hatred of sin, He could not simply turn a blind eye to our sinfulness. He had to judge us for it and the judgment was death. But because of His love for us, He took that judgment upon Himself and died in our place. So at the cross, justice and mercy met together. And that is what the Eucharist teaches us...it teaches us that we have all sinned and that we are all therefore deserving of the judgment of our righteous God...but it also teaches us that He has forgiven us, not by dismissing our sin, but by paying for it Himself. In the light of such holiness and such love, dearest brethren, how can we continue to do that which cost Him everything?

Let us therefore ask Him Who by His death has made it possible for us to walk in holiness to help us to accept the responsibility that is ours to do that walking. And then let us enter into this joint venture with our Father as we seek to bring in a bumper crop at the end of our respective seasons.

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