



Mount Olive Devotion

The Second Week After Epiphany (January 18-22, 2021)

Monday

II Corinthians 10:1-6

I myself, Paul, appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!—² I ask that when I am present I need not show boldness by daring to oppose those who think we are acting according to human standards.³ Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards;⁴ for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments⁵ and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ.⁶ We are ready to punish every disobedience when your obedience is complete.

In this passage the Apostle Paul is defending his ministry against some of his many enemies. In this case he defends himself against those who claim he is “acting according to human standards.” (vs. 2). Perhaps a better translation might be “in a worldly fashion,” for the original words have a bad sense, suggesting sinful behavior on his part. In any case, Paul does not choose to respond to his opponents by attacking their character, but by focusing on his main concern: their arguments and “every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God.” In other words, Paul’s main concern is false teaching. He wants to be sure the people stay true to the Gospel, to the Crucified Christ, and to the way of discipleship. He says it concisely: “We take every thought captive to obey Christ.” This means that any teaching which a person encounters must be compared with the teaching of Christ. If it does not match with Christ’s teaching, then we are to cast it aside. Good advice for us yet today.

Prayer

Give us wisdom, Wise God. Give us discernment, Spirit of the Living God. Give us knowledge that will be life-giving to us and to all with whom we share it. Open our eyes to the teachings of Christ and help us to follow. We pray in Jesus’ name. AMEN.

Tuesday

Judges 2:16-19

¹⁶Then the LORD raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them. ¹⁷Yet they did not listen even to their judges; for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their ancestors had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD; they did not follow their example. ¹⁸Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them. ¹⁹But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshiping them and bowing down to them. They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.

The book of Judges is part of the history of Israel, before the monarchy. After Moses and Joshua died there was a period when God's people were led by various sometimes unnamed persons who were called judges. These persons, men and women, were tribal leaders appointed to decide controversies and execute laws according to the traditions of Israel. According to these verses, whenever God raised up a judge the people would fall back into line with the Lord's will for them. However, when the judge died "they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors." This account points out the critical need for faithful leadership. Somehow, human nature is such that without faithful leadership we can easily forget our calling as people of God. We are seduced by false gods, whether greed, envy, anger, or the like, and we fall away from the path that God has laid out for us. We need to pray for our leaders – that they would be wise and faithful. We need also to pray that God would raise up more of them, men and women, who would lead God's people away from sin and into the light of God's grace.

Prayer

God of all history, you have called leaders for your people down through the ages. We thank you for those who have led us in the way of Christ and taught us according to your commands. Continue to raise up faithful leaders, and give to all courage, wisdom, boldness, and compassion to lead according to your will and way. In Jesus' name we pray. AMEN.

Wednesday

Matthew 25:1-13

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

This parable of Jesus is one that theologians and preachers have wrestled with for millennia. Augustine thought that the oil in the lamps was charity – that what was waning in the foolish bridesmaids’ lamps was their willingness to live in love. John Wesley, founder of Methodism thought the lamp was faith and the oil within it was faith working by love. So when the bridesmaids declared, “Our

lamps are going out,” they were saying that their faith was dead. Luther argued that no one has a superabundance of good works, shown by the fact that the wise ones would not share with those in need of oil. No matter how we interpret the parable, the last line is clear, “Keep awake.” This is always good advice. We need to be alert that our speech, actions, and habits in life are in line with God’s emerging kingdom of grace and love. A good way we do this is by “checking the oil in our lamp” every morning, through self-examination, repentance, and prayer. In this way, we will be less likely to be found in the place of the foolish ones in this story.

Prayer

You are the giver of all light and wisdom, Gracious God. You are the One who grants us insight to see, and hearts that are open to your Word. Help us always to be open to your Spirit’s leading. Give us a spirit of humility and teachability so that whatever you are teaching us, we will have ears to hear.

We pray this in Christ’s name. AMEN.

Thursday

Acts 5:1-6

But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ² with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" ⁵ Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him. ⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price." ⁹ Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is a tragic story about members of the early church who thought they could say one thing and do another. Like the rest of the members of the early church, assumedly, they had agreed to the practice that "no one claimed private ownership of any possessions but everything they owned was held in common." (Acts 4:32). This couple apparently had misgivings about that policy and decided to keep back for themselves some of the proceeds from the sale of some property. Notice what the main issue was: dishonesty. "You did not lie to us but to God!" One wise person has said that there is nothing so foolish as a dishonest prayer. So it is. God knows our hearts. God knows our motivations, our desires, our fears, and our failings. We are foolish if we think we can hide anything from God. God is also endlessly merciful. We do not need to fear being totally honest with God. We can be assured that whenever we confess our sins, they are forgiven. What freedom we have! – to live, knowing that whomever we are, whatever we have done, we will always be beloved of God.

Prayer

Grant us faith, Loving God, to come clean before you. Take away from us any notion that we can conceal ourselves from you. You have made us. You have redeemed us in Christ. You have promised to be with us to the end of the age. Give us confidence to live in the freedom of this promise. In the name of Christ, we pray.

Friday

Luke 18:15-17

¹⁵ People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. ¹⁶ But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁷ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

This brief passage from Luke's gospel is a familiar one. The last line has been a cause for many a sermon exhorting believers to "become as children". While there may be some wisdom to that, Jesus never says this. In fact, the word translated as "little child" is the Greek word for infant. Become as infants? Good luck on that. What seems likely is that Jesus is reminding us that the kingdom of God is given apart from any merit. We are granted entrance or a part in the kingdom not because we have finally become 'childlike' enough, but completely apart from that. We receive the kingdom of God because God wishes us to have it – it is grace. That is the thing which we must make peace with. How hard it is for us high achievers to let God simply give us the kingdom. "Certainly there is something I must do!" we insist. "No there isn't" says God. "Be as infants, content to lay in my arms, recipients of my love and protection."

Prayer

Help us to let go of our insistence on earning your favor, Gracious God. Help us to accept without question the gifts you give. You are the giver of all life. You are the ground upon which we stand. There is no life without you. We believe, Lord. Help our unbelief. We pray in Jesus' name. AMEN.