



Bible Study

August 31, 2016

II Corinthians 3:4-11
Matthew 23:29-39

II Corinthians 3:4-11 (NKJV) -

And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.

Matthew 23:29-39 (NKJV) - The Lord said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.' Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt. Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!'"

Commentary -

In today's epistle reading, St. Paul identifies himself as, by the Grace of God, a minister of the new covenant, the covenant made in Christ's Blood. He goes on to make a contrast between the new

covenant, and its ministry, and the old covenant, that covenant made at Mt. Sinai between God and His people through Moses with the blood of bulls and goats. The Apostle was seeing, in his own day, the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets through Jesus Christ, and the transformation that that brought about in God's relationship with His people, and within His people themselves. He sees the Glory of God, reflected in His Grace and Love for mankind, moving from Glory to greater Glory as he, as was the mission to which he was called, bears witness to the salvation not only of God's old covenant people, but that salvation bursting forth to fill the whole world, and all peoples.

Here St. Paul makes the famous distinction that the letter (of the Law) kills but the Spirit quickens (makes alive). This reference to the Law and to the old covenant as killing (and later, for example, as the ministry of condemnation) is sometimes misread as being some kind of rejection of the Law and of the old covenant, indicating that it is somehow evil in contrast to the Grace of the new covenant which brings freedom and joy. Rather, however, St. Paul is here simply describing the way in which the Law and the old covenant functioned, the purpose which they served, and which they continued to serve in St. Paul's day, and continue to serve in our own. That the Gospel of Christ serves another purpose, and that that purpose is, as the Apostle here recognizes, a greater and more glorious one, does nothing to slander the purpose served by the Law, which had its own, lesser glory.

The story of the Old Testament is one of Exile, and hoped for Restoration. That narrative is repeated again and again. Adam and Eve are given the Creation as a gift, they sin, and are exiled from Eden. Jacob receives the gift of his birthright (albeit by treachery) and then flees from his brother. Joseph receives great favor from his father, and then is sent into exile and slavery by his brothers. The Lord brings the people of Israel out of Egypt and gives them the land of promise, they sin and are filled with wickedness, and are sent into Exile in Babylon. In all of these cases, the message of the old covenant from God to his people through the Law and the Prophets was 'Repent!' God desired that no one should perish, He reminded them again and again, but that they should turn and live. To avoid God's judgment against their sin, to find some kind of restoration after alienation from God and exile from His Presence, what was required was to turn from sin, seek forgiveness, and strive to act justly. And so the message of repentance was given in ever harsher and more graphic terms to try to break through the hardness of God's people's hearts and bring them to repent. It is in this way that the Law kills and condemns, it points to the fact that we in our choices choose death rather than life. It reveals to us just how estranged from God we have become and that it has happened through our own sin and rebelliousness.

There were two problems with the old covenant. The first is pointed to, heartbreakingly, in today's Gospel reading. Christ tenderly reveals the Love of God for His people, desiring like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings to give them warmth and protection to gather up His people, to protect them from what is to come, and give them life and peace and comfort, but His people will not accept it. The prophets came announcing to Israel and later to Judah and Judea convicting the people of their sinfulness and calling on them before it was too late, and judgment came upon them. Rather than being wounded by God's Love and turning back to him, however, they killed the prophets to silence them, and continued to pursue wickedness. This continued from Abel, the first man killed, through to St. John the Forerunner's father Zachariah whom they slew in the Temple itself, to St. John himself, who came with the same message of repentance and was beheaded by Herod to silence his condemnation of Herod's wickedness. Through the old covenant, God shed light on the sinfulness of men, but those men loved darkness, and did all they could to extinguish the light, rather than face up to their actions and turn from them.

In the second place, the old covenant, while offering reconciliation to God through repentance, offered only a partial restoration and reconciliation. The reconciliation that it offered, the peace and the joy, like everything else in this life, faded away and was swallowed up by death. Even the Glory of God, reflected from the face of Moses after he had ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the Law, faded away from his face over time. In this way the old covenant was not bad, but incomplete. Even for those who

heeded its words in repentance, having died in peace with God, still died.

And this is why our Lord proclaimed that though the Forerunner and Baptist John was the greatest man ever born of a woman, that the least in the Kingdom of Heaven was greater than he, because the Kingdom of Heaven has received the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Kingdom, those under the new covenant, know of the great victory won by Jesus Christ at His Cross, that while all our hopes were before swallowed up by death now death itself has been swallowed up by that victory. Yes, the knowledge of our sin and wickedness has slain us, but the Resurrection of Christ shows and guarantees for us that there is, on the other side of that death and condemnation, new and eternal life. The Glory of Christ that shone from His Resurrected body is one which will never fade away.

The way which leads to salvation and life still leads through repentance. The person who we have been, our flesh with its lusts and desires and wickedness, has to die, and we must, through the Law of God, put it to death daily. But even as that old, rebellious self, descended from the first rebel Adam, is killed, a new person, a new us, is coming to life, formed in the image of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. Like St. Paul, we are therefore become ministers of a new and better covenant because we proclaim not only that the wages of sin is death, but also the glorious, never fading truth that the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Questions to Ponder -

- 1) The people of Israel, Judah, and Judea killed the prophets whom God sent to them because the Truth which the prophets proclaimed to them regarding their own sins and wickedness enraged them, and so they sought to silence them. In Vespers, we sing the Psalm verse, “Let the just man correct me with mercy, but let not the oil of the sinner anoint my head”, meaning that it is better for us to be corrected or rebuked by someone who sees our sins and errors than it is to be praised by those who would lead us further down the path of sin. How do you respond to criticism? Do you understand those who criticize and judge you to be (whether they intend it or not) to be acting as your friend? Do you try to surround yourself with people who will approve of all your choices, good or bad, to feel supported? Who is it who truly loves you, the person who seeks to correct you, or the person who encourages even your worst impulses?
- 2) All of the glory of this world fades, whether it be vainglory in worldly riches and possessions, or even true glory in honorable behavior and a life well lived. Which do you find yourself pursuing more in your life, the things of the Kingdom, which are sought in quiet and in secret, or glory in this world in front of other people? Which is more important to you, a clear conscience before God, or a good reputation before men?
- 3) New Life in Christ, the Kingdom of Heaven, is found through repentance. For us to become alive in the Kingdom to live there forever with Christ, the 'us' who are of this world, who follow after the world, the flesh, and the devil, our rebellious nature and our sinful desires, need to die. The old Adam is killed off through the hard work of prayer and fasting, and our Church year is structured around the dynamic St. Paul speaks of in the epistle today. Periods of fasting and repentance are followed by periods of feasting and celebration. These things go together. To fully experience the joy of Christ's Resurrection in our lives, we must fully embrace the repentance of Great Lent. Do you use the Church calendar to bring the reality of Christ's Redemption into your daily life? Do you fully engage with the fasts and prayers and services of the Church, and also with the feasts and celebrations? Or do you pay more attention to the world's calendar that focuses more on celebrating the end of a work week than Christ?

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