

When I subscribed to *The State* Newspaper in Columbia, South Carolina I used to enjoy reading certain comic strips on Sunday. I was very fond of the late Johnny Hart's strip "BC." When one BC character asked another how Daniel had survived in the lion's den, the answer was that Daniel lived through the ordeal by being a particularly insightful Bible reader. You see, while he was in that place of mortal peril, he was given a Bible, and Daniel was able to read the lions into a particularly peaceful sleep. So you see, Daniel was able to read between the lions! ☺



Daniel in the Lion's Den by Peter Paul Rubens

Could I ask you to read between the lines in the Epistle this morning? I know that this passage from 1st Corinthians 3 is often used by pastors to encourage people to take better care of their human bodies. Paul writes here that you are God's temple. Therefore, if what dwells in the body is holy, the body must be treated with great respect, and not abused by unhealthy life styles. And all of that is fine. You will hear sermons preached on this passage that rail against smoking, and drinking, and gluttony. And if that's the message God has laid on someone's heart to give from the pulpit, far be it from me to condemn.

But if you read this chapter with a minimum of care, in fact, if you read the entire *1st letter to the Corinthians* with an attitude of trying to understand what is most vexing Paul about this brand-new church in Corinth, you come away with the clear understanding that the "body" Paul is most worried about being abused is not the human body. Instead the body that is of most concern to Paul is the body of believers, that is the church itself. And we heard last week about the factions and strife which are now dividing and wounding the body of believers in Corinth, how some are living their lives in one direction, and others are following a completely different set of priorities. In short, the Corinthians are not following the principles of Holy living that should be applied to all the faithful equally if we are to be truly children of God. These are the same principles we heard God speak to Moses, these character traits of kindness, and patience, and righteousness, and humility, and mercy, and love that are the hallmarks of the believer.

And for me the key verse in this passage from 1 Corinthians 3 is verse 11, where Paul says "No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ." Paul is saying, "Make no mistake dear brothers and sisters of Corinth, or perhaps even "Make no mistake, dear bothers and sisters of Jacksonville, the one way, the **only** way to build a life that truly shines with love for God and with love for each other, and which marks us as children of the King, the only way to construct that kind of life is to build it upon our faith in He who loved us completely to the end, The Risen Lord Jesus. There is no other foundation of such stability that will never yield, even against the forces of Hell itself, but only the Lord Christ.

And if, instead, you base your life on the imperfect and fickle promises of this world, sooner or later your house will come crumbling down like sand castles before the incoming tide.

This morning's Epistle finishes with a claim of ownership. Paul reminds the Corinthians that all things in this world have been given by God to be under the dominion and care of man. (See verse 21) But then Paul reminds the Corinthians that while the world does indeed belong to us for our use while we walk through it, we ourselves belong to God. But, we can only truly belong to a holy God if we as his children are holy beings.


My wife pointed out something to me last week which really caught my attention. The frustration so many people feel with our political leaders right now often has little to do with the substance of the various positions they are adopting. Oh, yes, I'm sure that just about everyone in this church has their own views about emigration, and health care, and national defense, and the nation's debt burden, and I have no doubt that the positions espoused by members of St. Peter's, Jacksonville will be as divergent as those in any community involving a variety of people. But the frustration with our political leadership right now seems to be caused not necessarily by the positions these leaders are taking. Rather, people are fed up with today's politicians because of the manner (or lack of manners) with which they conduct themselves.

The problem, you see, is their 'way of being.' It's a profound statement, particularly when you consider all of the readings for today which focus on the fact that if we truly belong to God, then we must by definition be holy beings, leading a holy life.

In Leviticus 19, God describes to the children of Israel his character profile. God is painting a picture of himself to his children. And in this picture God is completely kind, and wonderfully merciful, and totally righteous, and completely fair minded, and incredibly long suffering, and supremely and forever loving. And that's hard enough to wrap your head around, but the real kicker – the most startling thing about Leviticus 19 is not just that God is all of these wonderful things; the real zinger is that God expects his children to be that way too. The most sobering instruction that comes from this passage of Leviticus is that if we are really going to take seriously our paternity in the family tree of God, we must be that way too. A people who is holy according to the standards of the Lord God must be kind, and merciful, and righteous, and fair-minded, and long-suffering, and completely devoted to selfless love. But, and here's the key – we're not! Not always. Not completely. The verse, "You shall be holy for I the Lord God am holy," seems to set a totally unreasonable standard, because of the gulf that separates unholy man from holy God. Unless...unless...unless God sees something deep within us that we cannot see ourselves

The psalm for today is a song of praise for the structure and order of a Godly life. Psalm 119 is what's known as an "alphabetic acrostic." You can think about it as holy poetry written in the structure of a crossword puzzle. There are twenty-two stanzas each with 8 verses. Each stanza marks one letter of the Hebrew Alphabet. For example, the first eight verses of the psalm in the original Hebrew all begin with the letter *aleph*, the Hebrew equivalent of our letter "A.". The next eight verses all begin with *beth*, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet which corresponds to the English letter "B" and so on for 176 verses until we reach the end of the matter, where the final 8 verses of the psalm all begin with the last Hebrew letter *tav*. No wonder the psalm is so long! Each of the letters must have its turn.¹

Psalm 119 continually points to the central focus of being faithful to God's statutes as provided in his Covenant with Israel. So you will hear words repeated like, God's "Law, God's "Precepts," God's "Commandments," God's "rules," and of course, God's "Word."

In the stanza of Psalm 119 assigned for this morning, we have the verses corresponding to *hey*, the 5th letter in the Hebrew Alphabet. The symbol is interesting. The original pictograph for this letter is , a man standing with his arms raised up. In modern Hebrew, this letter *hey* is associated with a Hebrew word meaning "behold," as when looking at a great sight. This word can also mean "breath" or "sigh," as one does when looking at a great sight. The meaning of the letter *hey* is "behold," "look," "sigh," "reveal" pointing to the idea of revealing a great sight by pointing it out.

This letter can be a consonant, with an "h" sound in front. But it's also used as a vowel with the "eh" sound. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek in the Third Century BC *hey* became the Greek letter *epsilon* with an "eh" sound.² Of course, that came down to us as our own fifth letter "E." The central focus of this stanza from Psalm 119 are verses 36 and 37, which summarize a yearning for righteousness. "Incline my heart to Your testimonies and not to *dishonest* gain. Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity, and revive me in Your ways." So, of course even in Moses' day God's people knew right from wrong, and there was a yearning to be righteous. The challenge is, of course, that full attainment of this righteousness cannot be achieved according to God's perfect law by imperfect man. But the yearning is still very much present, especially among the Old Testament Saints. And God says, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord am holy." But how can God possibly expect that of us...unless...unless...God sees something in us that human eyes cannot perceive.

¹See <http://www.andreascenter.org/Articles/Psalm%20119.htm>.

² See http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/alphabet_letters_hey.html.

And if you think the requirements we're under to lead a holy life get relaxed with the coming of Our Lord into this world, let me invite you to think again. Just read the Gospel. If someone strikes your left cheek, offer your right cheek as well. (See Mt.5:39) If someone takes your tunic, give him your cloak, too. (See Mt.5:40) If someone makes you walk a mile to meet their demands, don't just compromise, but walk a second mile as well. (See Mt.5:41) And give to everyone who begs you for help. Let anyone who asks borrow from you. (See Mt.5:41) And don't just love each other, but love your enemies too.(See Mt.5:43) But, my God, my God, this is even worse than your first set of demands.

Lord how am I supposed to live up to all these standards? These are even more demanding than the ones you gave Moses. What's going on here? How can God expect any of us to act this way...unless...unless he knows something about us that is hidden to human eyes.

Good people, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not an Avis Rental Car Commercial. We people of the Cross are not a people who simply say, "We try harder." Because the truth is, we can never try hard enough to be worthy in God's eyes. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a Nike Commercial. Even if we strap on the very latest athletic foot wear and adopt the slogan of "Just do it," the truth is, we – you and I – will never get the job done. Despite assurances of "Yes we can," the truth is "No, we can't." Not by ourselves.

So, here's what I think God sees in all of us with these Scripture readings. In Leviticus 19, when God says, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord God am holy," suppose he's not issuing a rule, or a warning, or a caution. Instead, maybe God is making us a promise. Maybe he has looked deep into every one of us and seen us for the broken, and hurting people we really are. And God this morning says to you and me, "Be not afraid, my child. Because I have seen your loneliness, and your pain, and your shame. And I know of your yearning to be loved. So I, the Holy one, will make you holy too, so that you can be truly mine. I am preparing for you an event of such power, that the universe will be transformed. And you shall be redeemed, and sanctified, and made holy, for I the Lord God am holy."

And when Jesus says, "Be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect," what if he is saying, "Be not afraid, my brothers and sisters. For I have searched your hearts deep within you. And I love you so much, that I am going to do something so powerful, so terribly magnificent that you will be forever changed. And you will shed the trappings of this mortal life and go to dwell with the perfect Father in heaven as his righteous ones, sanctified children, perfectly saved by the means of grace and for the hope of glory.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen

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