

What God is doing in the Old Testament lesson for this morning is drawing a line in the sand. With the 10 Commandments, The Lord God is, for the first time, setting out basic premises for what is right and what is wrong. He is actually defining sin and calling it what it is. From this point forward, God's children are left in no doubt as to what is a righteous life in the eyes of the Lord God. Before this session on the mountain between Moses and God, the world had been a sort of grey place. There were some vague ideas that God was in some way going to bless his children who were faithful to Him. He had said as much to Abraham.



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But with the 10 Commandments, from this point forward, stark contrasts were established in a world painted not in shades of grey. With the 10 Commandments, black and white differences were created and defined with regard to what is righteousness and what is sin. And there would evolve over the next four books of the Bible the Torah, God's Laws. And this Torah would set up a system of commandments and consequences. A whole set of laws would be established instructing people just exactly what they were to do in order to lead a righteous life. And if you broke the rules, if you transgressed God's holy law, you had to pay for it. There were consequences for disobeying God's rules. There still are.

A whole system of consequences and sacrifices was established for the Children of Israel as a means of getting back into a right relationship with God if you broke His law. So, with the 10 Commandments and the Torah, God set up a system of laws and consequences to govern the behavior of his people.

I once heard an interesting insight as to how such a system of rules and consequences can function in this life. A Local Cub Scout leader told me he lived a couple of years as a teenager which were rebellious ones. At a certain point, this young man got suspended from school for three days for playing hooky, and he thought, "Well, this is great! I'll just get a chance to sleep late and not do any schoolwork." But unfortunately for him, the young man's grandfather had other ideas. At 5:30 AM the first morning of his suspension, the grandfather arrived in the youngster's bedroom with a bucketful of pine saplings, a ball of twine, and a post-hole digger. And for the next 3 days from sunup to sundown, the youngster planted dozens of ruler-straight lines of pine trees on the family farm. You know, that young man never missed another day of school in his life!

So, with the 10 Commandments God set up his laws, and He established a world in which there are consequences for breaking those laws. And by the way, that's still true today. But God also knew that something was missing. God knew how rebellious his children were; He already knew - even when he issued His laws to the Children of Israel, He knew that those same children were going to break those laws.

If you're in any doubt of this, just fast-forward in your mind to the Gospel reading for this morning. Jesus comes into His Father's house, the Temple in Jerusalem, which is supposed to be the holiest place on earth. And what does Jesus find? He finds a whole bunch of people sellin' stuff. Right there, in the Temple of the Lord God, Jesus finds people buyin,' and sellin,' and cheatin' one another, and makin' money off the worship of The Lord God. That's how rebellious we human beings are! We'll take even something as pure and holy and glorious as the worship experience

itself, and we'll take that and twist it, and use it for our own selfish, vain, deceitful ends. That's how hard-wired you and I are to sin.

So, what's a body to do? God sets forth his Holy Law about how a real man or woman of God is to act, and speak, and think. And yet we His children go to every possible length we can to get around those laws, or ignore them, or even worse we take them and twist them to our own selfish ends. But, the consequences for breaking these laws are still there, and we are so incredibly surprised when we have to confront those consequences. So what's a person to do in order to develop a genuine, meaningful, fulfilled relationship with The Lord God?

Well, the first thing we need to do is to recognize sin for what it is. Our sins are all those thoughts, and words, and actions which keep us from being the men and women of God that we were born to be. Sin is anything which leads us away from God and which divides us from each other. Acts of selfishness which cause others to suffer; words spoken in anger that cause hurt to those who we are supposed to love; actions which are born in deceit or pride. All these things cheapen our lives, lessen our world, wither our souls and - most importantly-these sinful thoughts and words and actions grieve the heart of the one who loves us so very much, Our Father in heaven.

So the first thing we have to do if we want a real relationship with the Lord, is to recognize sin for what it is – to understand how incredibly destructive sin is to us and to those we love. The first thing we have to do in order to have a real relationship with Jesus is to man-up for those things we've done which have betrayed The Lord's love for us.

But it doesn't stop there. We need something more. Because if we just stop there with an admission of our guilt, we're left in the same squalid ditch of damnation. Yes, we can admit our sin, and even ask forgiveness. But tomorrow morning, we wake up to this same sinful world. And then what are we going to do? Paul says it so well in his desperate cry from Romans Chapter 7: "Oh wretched man that I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom7:24).

You see, in order to be really free from the destruction of sin, we need a transformed heart. All the laws in the universe will never make us into the obedient, righteous, sanctified people of God who have a real relationship with the Father. We can come face-to-face with our sin and its consequences, and ask forgiveness. But to really walk hand-in-hand with the Lord through this life, we need to be a people of transformed hearts.

In the world of chemistry, an agent which is responsible for a change of state is called a "catalyst." In the Spiritual realm, that catalyst which leads to a transformed state of the heart is known as "faith." Where does this transformative agent of faith come from? Well, by this world's standards, it's actually much easier to say where faith **doesn't** come from. When the Author of Hebrews says that faith is the "assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1), part of that means that faith has no part with the proving ground of this mortal world.

That's really what Paul is talking about at the beginning of the Corinthian Correspondence this morning. Because he says that we Christians base our very existence on something that is utter foolishness to this world. You and I profess our surrender to the absolute sovereignty of this strange God/man Jesus who actually went to a horrifying death for our sake in his Crucifixion. And to the dominant paradigms of Paul's day, the laws and traditions of the Jewish world, and the logic and order of the Greco/Roman world, the Crucifixion was completely unacceptable. To accept that the long-awaited Messiah would undergo the shame and torment of the Crucifixion was offensive to the Jews. And submitting to such a tormented death was insane nonsense to the logic and earthly

wisdom structures of the Greeks and Romans. So, clearly, the origins of this Spiritual catalyst of Christian faith which finally made possible the genuine transformation of the rebellious and fickle human heart and brought us to a state of willing obedience and surrender to the sweet lordship of the Master, this faith simply could not have come from earthly sources, but rather from the well-spring of a living water that could only come from another realm, and destined for citizenry of another King.

The Gospel message, the great good news of Jesus Christ Crucified and Resurrected made no sense by this world's standards, and could not be accepted by the broken and self-serving earthly authorities of that day. And that's true for us today as well. If you try to prove and recommend the Gospel truth according to the priorities and presumptions of this world, you're on a fool's mission. The faith which transforms the human heart and moves mountains for the sake of God's Kingdom, that faith is not born of this world. Such a faith cannot even be recognized by the vision of this world. Oh, but it is that faith which is, finally, the only remedy for the broken-ness this world is so ready to deal out. But a truly transformed heart which has been opened to the true knowledge of that peace that passes all understanding, that transformation can only come from our rebirth in the true knowledge, wonder, and lordship of Jesus Christ. And that Lordship is, as Jesus said the night he began his passion, is from another Kingdom than anything this world has ever spawned.

This need for a transformed heart has been from time to time a major focus of mine - particularly in conversations I've had with my prayer partners. And one of these men of God said something to me that has really stuck. He said, "You know, James, if we really want God to come into our lives in a mighty way, we have to be willing to pray earnestly go God for deliverance and provision, and then really believe that God will deliver and provide." That's the kind of heart that is so needed today - the heart that goes to The Lord in humble and earnest prayer, and is then willing to believe with utter confidence that indeed the Lord will redeem. That's the kind of transformed heart which is a mighty witness to the Gospel. That kind of heart can do great things for the Kingdom of God.

The Psalmist is right, you know. Yes, "The Law of the Lord is perfect...the testimony of the Lord is sure...the statutes of the Lord are just...the commandment of the Lord are clear... the fear of the Lord is clean...the judgments of the Lord are true." (see Ps. 19:7-11). All of this is so very, very true. But to be people of the Lord, we have to be a people of transformed hearts - hearts wedded to the absolute assurance of God's infinite love and faithfulness.

So, once again, this sermon finishes with a question. This Lent, are you asking God to change you? This Lent, we've talked about the faith to be found in life's trials, and the faith to be had in sincere acts of denial. But today, we're focusing on that faith which is strong enough to actually change people forever. So, are you seeking a relationship with God which is closer, and more peaceful, and more constant than what you've settled for in the past? This Lent, are you asking God to transform your heart? Because that is part of my prayer for us this Lent. That we all may become people of the heart, men and women with hearts truly transformed and given over completely to absolute trust in the Lord.

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

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