

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

^{20:1} Then God spoke all these words: ² I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³ you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ... ⁷ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. ⁸ Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ... ¹² Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³ You shall not murder. ¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ You shall not steal. ¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

¹⁸ When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, ¹⁹ and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die."

²⁰ Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

Commentary

With the exception of the fourth and fifth commandments, the Decalogue is stated as a series of prohibitions, often seen as negatives. The intention, however, was to stress by contrast with what is prohibited, that which was good and acceptable in the life of the community. Incredible freedom was implicit in the relationship of the individual to God as well as to the community, as defined by the commandments. The injunctions provided a structure by which the community could respond to God's love. Jesus would later summarize (in the Gospel of Mark) the commandments in two positive phrases: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Reflection

Aside from the absolutes of the law, the individual is free to live in response to God's love. This is close to Martin Luther's summary of Christian ethics, uttered centuries later: "Love God, and do as you please." Do we need more guidance than this?

Philippians 3:4b-14

^{3:4b} If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Commentary

To know Christ, to be in Christ, is what Paul is seeking. Righteousness is not living blamelessly under the law. Paul is seeking a righteousness that is not his own doing, but one that "comes through faith in Christ Jesus." He strains toward the goal of participation in the "power of his resurrection." He presses on, because Christ made him His own. Some scholars suggest that this translation belies the urgency and forcefulness of the Greek; Christ, in Paul's understanding, "overtakes" or "seizes" the believer in an outpouring of grace. The only response is to continue striving toward the prize.

Reflection

What does it mean for you to be "in Christ?"

Matthew 21:33-46

^{21:33} "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went

to another country. ³⁴ When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵ But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' ³⁹ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰ Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" ⁴¹ They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." ⁴² Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?" ⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴ The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." ⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Commentary

Today's lection, the parable of the vineyard, appears also in Mark and Luke. Highlighted in this retelling is the necessity of "producing fruit" befitting the realm of God, a theme found throughout Matthew. Such fruit is the result of complete obedience to God as lived out in the community of faith. This image of the vineyard would be immediately recognizable to Jesus' audience. They would connect the story with the vineyard of Israel depicted in Isaiah 5, a vineyard destroyed because it would only produce wild grapes. Matthew's account allows the listeners to implicate themselves in its conclusion; in Mark and Luke, Jesus answers his own question. The full impact of Jesus' message became clear as he quoted Psalm 118:22-23. The vineyard is now the reign of God.

Reflection

Think about our discipleship and witness; do we see evidence of the fruits of God's rule in our life?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 19

^{19:1} The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

² **Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.**

³ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;

⁴ **yet their voice goes out through all the earth,**

and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

⁶ **Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.**

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
**the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;**

⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
**the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;**

⁹ the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
**the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.**

¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
**sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.**

¹¹ Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.

¹² **But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.**

¹³ Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.

**Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.**

¹⁴ **Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.**

Closing Prayer

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**