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Outlines on the Standard Epistle Series

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ASH WEDNESDAY

JOEL 2:12-19

Introduction

On this day the church enters a great penitential season. The lesson for the Epistle is Joel's call to repentance. In her struggle for recognition and a place in the political sun, Israel had lost sight of her destiny as God's chosen instrument for the salvation of the world and had instead become involved in power politics to preserve her position as a worldly power. In spite of the warning voice of the prophets, Israel persisted in this course and came to grief. Her society was split, her borders were ravaged, her land was made subject, she became a laughing stock to her neighbors, and her God a reproach. In Israel's infidelity and frustration we have a picture of man, always seeking his own, striving first to carve out a destiny for himself apart from God, always coming to grief — not finding the "success" he seeks or, finding it, discovering it to be empty and barren, not at all what he had expected.

It should be no great surprise to us then that down through the centuries the prophets, the Savior, the apostles, the church, all have stressed:

The Significance of Repentance

I. *The Reason for Repentance*

- A. Israel had sinned in turning to her own way.
 - 1. Israel sought her destiny as a great nation rather than as a servant of God's plan of salvation.
 - 2. In same way man has sought

peace, life, joy, and fulfillment apart from God.

- B. God is the kind of God to whom one can turn. (Joel 2:13 f.)
 - 1. To overlook this fact is to pass by the very heart of the Gospel.
 - 2. This is the message of the Cross.
 - a. To the Greeks foolishness (that the gods should be concerned about men)
 - b. To the Jews a stumbling block (that God should deal with sinners while they are yet sinners)

II. *The Nature of Repentance*

- A. It is a true turning. (Joel 2:13a)
 - 1. Not a change merely in habits or demeanor
 - 2. But change of the heart; change in the direction of life at its very center
- B. It is accompanied by true sorrow. (Joel 2:12b)
 - 1. No sorrow and no mourning means no recognition of the nature of sin.
 - 2. True sorrow leads to true fasting. (Gospel: Matt. 6:16-18)
 - a. True fasting for the purpose of letting the body join in the mood of the soul
 - b. Needs of the body de-emphasized and so needs of the soul re-emphasized

III. *The Results of Repentance*

- A. It reunites God and man.
- B. The blessings of God are poured out.
 - 1. A superficial view of the text would lead us to think that repentance is for securing material blessing: the invader frustrated; prosperity restored. (Joel 2:19)
 - 2. But Israel's status as God's instrument was involved. Israel's neighbors looked upon the gods of a conquered people as weak, ineffectual, and worthy of disdain. They scoffed at a god who could not or would not "support his people."
- C. God's way becomes known among men. As the blessings of God are poured out upon us (love, joy, peace, longsuffering, patience), we reflect His nature and His glory by acknowledging them as His gifts.

Conclusion

By true repentance the will and the purpose of God become paramount in our lives, the will and the power of the God "who hateth nothing that He hath made" (Collect for Ash Wednesday) and who would have all men to be saved.

Lent calls us to true repentance, even as Joel called the people of God to true repentance, the repentance that places us as instruments in His hands . . . willing, dedicated, sanctified.

Therefore, in this Lenten season we "Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people."

The solemn call is for all: "the elders as well as the children and those that suck the breasts."

And no circumstance or issue, no project or undertaking is to take priority over this: "let the bridegroom go forth out of his

chamber and the bride out of her closet." All of God's servants are to be fit for His service.

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

2 CORINTHIANS 6:1-10

Introduction

"And it shall come to pass afterward," says the prophet Joel (2:28, 29), "that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions; and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit."

Joel speaks of the day in which the service of God will be the prerogative and responsibility not of a select few but of all. Standing in this "afterward," this dispensation of which Joel spoke, St. Paul speaks to us the words of the text: "We then, as workers together with Him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain." Note: St. Paul is here not necessarily speaking of "grace" in the narrower sense but in the larger sense of all the gifts which God pours out upon us by His spirit. This grace, these gifts, we are not to receive in vain, that is, to no purpose. Therefore it is imperative that we give serious attention to

Receiving the Grace of God

I. *When do we receive the grace of God in vain?*

- A. When we would receive it solely for our own benefit.

St. Paul associates the grace of God immediately with ministry. (6:1) This is the day of salvation, "when God's spirit has been poured out upon all" (Joel 2:28) and all are co-workers with Him. (6:2)

- B. When we would receive it to free us from trouble.

One would think that men who brought a great gift would be met with honor and glory and received with thanks. Not so.

1. The example of Jesus
 - a. He brought the grace of God. (John 1:17)
 - b. He met with enmity, opposition, suffering, and death.
 - c. Satan offered Him the high-road of popularity, fame, and power. Gospel: Matt. 4:11)
 - d. He rejected it that He might bring the grace of God.
2. The example of St. Paul
 - a. St. Paul gloried in the grace of God.
 - b. Yet it brought him endless suffering, ostracism from his people, and finally a martyr's death. (6:4, 5)

I. *When do we receive the grace of God properly?*

- A. When we receive it to empower us for His service.

1. St. Paul's ministry was imbued with power.
2. God's grace was its dynamic. (1 Cor. 15:10)
3. This is what it means to receive the grace of God to a purpose, not in vain.

- B. When we receive it to strengthen us for His service.

1. St. Paul's ministry was attended by terrifying affliction. (2 Cor. 6:4, 5; 11:23-28)
2. Yet in all suffering he received strength through God's grace. (Phil. 4:11-13)

Conclusion

This, then, is what it means to receive the grace of God to a purpose: to His purpose. We are not to receive it solely for our own benefit or for protection from work and suffering, but to empower and strengthen us for His service.

Priceless grace is what St. Paul speaks of. It is priceless because it cost a Man His life, and it is grace because it gives life—the only true life.

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-7

Introduction

God has called us into His service. This is the glory of the Christian. It is his glory because in it he finds fulfillment, his destiny, the meaning and purpose for his life, knowing that he is in partnership with God. If all this is not glory, then we have lost all contact with the true meaning of the word.

It is also his burden. It sets up the fearful conflict between the flesh and the spirit. It puts him in the throes of the tension between what he wants to do and what he ought to do. It puts him into conflict with the world, for the world seeks its own and wants no interference or criticism from any who seek the will and the way of Another.

In this tension, then, we find ourselves: called into His service and yet driven, harried, lured, seduced into the service of the devil, the world, and our flesh. Is God unconcerned about this tension, this conflict in our lives? We shall find it is very much His concern when we consider the nature and the extent of

God's Call

I. *God calls us to holiness*

- A. Holy, as applied to objects and men, means "separated," "set aside" for God's service.

1. Jerusalem was "holy."
2. The Ark of the Covenant was "holy."
3. The Temple was "holy."
4. Mt. Zion, Mt. Horeb were "holy."
5. All these were set aside, separated, dedicated to the service of God. But all these were objects, places, things.
 - a. They had no will of their own to oppose the will of God.
 - b. They could be set aside, as one would place a chair or move a table.
6. Man is not simply an "object" or a "thing."
 - a. He has a will of his own with which he may oppose God.
 - b. He has desires, wants, aspirations which by nature are turned in the wrong direction — away from God.
- B. In order that we might be set aside for God's service, He must call, enlighten, and sanctify us.
 1. He makes us holy through faith in Christ Jesus.
 2. He instills in us the holy desire to serve Him.

will, and the spirit with the flesh without doing great damage to both.

Conclusion

We revert to our earlier question: "Is God unconcerned about the tension, the conflict in our lives?" The answer is, of course, that He is vastly concerned. For He would make us whole. It is for this purpose that He sent His Son, that we might be made whole. It is for this purpose that His Holy Spirit is at work, who not only calls us into His service but makes us fit for that service.

Here is the substance and theme of Lent: contrition and faith, the conviction that without Him we are lost (Collect: O God, who seest that of ourselves we have no strength) and therefore we turn to Him in repentance and trusting faith that in Him we shall be made whole (Gospel: "Her daughter was made whole from that very hour").

Herein also is "the peace that passeth all understanding," that comes with surrender to Him, that comes despite the continuation of the war between will and desire, between flesh and spirit, as He who calls us to His service makes us increasingly fit for His service.

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

EPHESIANS 5:1-9

Introduction

Perhaps the greatest mistake in our modern world is the confusion of moralism with religion. For the majority of men the terms are synonymous; but actually they are poles apart. For moralism assumes that God is concerned merely with what a man does, and religion insists that God is concerned with what a man is. Moralism maintains that a man can summon his own resources to help him to do what is right and good; religion insists that there are no such re-

II. *God equips us for holiness*

- A. It is not God's will that we should
 1. Do one thing and *desire* another.
 2. Be *His* in the spirit and serve *our flesh* in the body. This is the very essence of death, to be torn apart, disintegrated.
- B. It is God's will that we should be whole.
 1. One in act, will, desire.
 2. One in spirit and in flesh.

For the act cannot be at war with the

sources inherent in man, in fact, that "in him, that is in his flesh, there dwelleth no good thing." This is really another way of saying that there is but one religion: Christianity, and that all others are, in one way or another, systems of morality.

The religion of Israel was a religion of promise (Gen. 3:15; 22:18) and was perverted into a system of morality (Judaism), a religion of external righteousness, centered in the Law. As such it summoned man ultimately to save himself by a proper response to the Law.

Today's Epistle points to the difference between religion and morality by insisting that it is not only what a man does, but what he thinks or desires that will bring him into condemnation. It exhorts you to:

Sanctify Your Minds

- I. *We shall be judged not only on what we do.*
 - A. It is not enough to control our bodies.
 1. If we were to do only this, we would do no more than the heathen do.
 - a. It is true that in paganism there was much vice and immorality. (Rom. 1:26 ff.)
 - b. Yet the great philosophers, and the "higher religions" exhort also to moderation, to purity, chastity, and morality.
 2. In this we could be doing no more than serving ourselves.
 - a. The proper stewardship of the body makes for good health, physical well-being, greater earning power, etc. All of this serves us well.
 - b. Proper sobriety, morality, purity, make for a good reputation in the community, a fine standing with our employers, a sound credit rating, etc. All this serves us well.
 - B. It is not enough that we refrain from defrauding our brother in a dishonest transaction.
 1. This, again, could be a matter of serving ourselves.

A reputation for honesty and integrity is by no means to be despised. It can be a great help in advancement, in gaining desirable position in the community.
 2. In refraining from defrauding our brother we are only meeting him in justice.
 - a. We are giving him what is his due.
 - b. We are asking to be met with the same fairness.
 - C. Such external deeds may not be enough to escape the verdict that they who do them still are "partakers with the children of disobedience." "The children of disobedience" are not necessarily foul, immoral, dishonest. They may indeed be outwardly upright, moral, honest. But God's judgment is predicated on more than external acts.
- II. *We shall be judged on what we are in our inmost being.*
 - A. We are not even to entertain thoughts of evil, or speak evil (Eph. 5:3,4). What we *think* is the measure of what we *are*: "as a man thinketh in his heart, so *is* he." (Prov. 23:7; Luke 6:45a)
 - B. We are not merely to meet our neighbor in justice (not defraud him); we are to meet him in love. (Eph. 5:2)
 1. To meet him in justice is to give him his due.
 2. To meet him in love is to give him what Christ gave us — Himself. (Eph. 5:2)

Conclusion

We are not only to do what is right, we are to be what is right. We are not only to meet our neighbor in justice (which is hard enough) but in love (which is infinitely harder). "How can these things be?" Only through Him in whom we are to be born again, made new. Yes, made new, mind you! Not confronted with a higher code, not exhorted to a greater effort, but *made new*—cleansed and purified by His blood, united again with the Father by His sacrificial suffering and death.

"How can this be?" Only by Him who can cast out the devil (Gospel for day). Only by Him "who on the tree of the cross did give salvation to all mankind." (Proper Preface for Lent)

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

GALATIANS 4:21-31

Introduction

Moralism has consistently been one of the problems of mankind. It rests on the delusion that God expects man to do only what is right, even though he hates doing it. This is to invite the disintegration of man because he is asked to serve two masters.

Legalism is another delusion. It appears to rest on the notion that a law does not merely make demands on a man, but that it gives him the resources to fulfill those demands. Its basic error is the supposition that man is inherently good. It is thought that the Law can harness this goodness and bring about obedience, fulfillment, salvation.

But, says St. Paul, this is a patent falsehood. What is in man is not goodness, but sin; not obedience, but rebellion. Therefore when the Law called upon what was in man, it could call only upon sin; and by this it betrayed him and slew him (Rom. 7:11). The Law is good, but it has no power; it

can only call on what is in man, and that is not good. It is sin.

The problem among St. Paul's contemporaries, especially the Galatians, was the struggle between salvation by the Promise and salvation by the Law. He dramatizes the basic issues in an allegory and describes them in terms of:

Bondage and Freedom

I. *Wherein does bondage consist?*

A. Agar (Hagar)

1. She was a bondswoman.
 - a. Sarah's handmaiden (Egyptian)
 - b. Not of the race or religion of Abraham
2. Her offspring was born into bondage.
3. Her offspring (Ishmael) was "born of the flesh," born of the weakness of Abraham's faith, not of God's Promise.

B. The Law

1. This is a part of the covenant from Mt. Sinai.
 - a. God did not intend that Israel should be saved by the Law, but that Israel should by obedience to the Law demonstrate how a saved people live.
 - b. God did not intend by the Law to throw Israel on her own resources, but to give Israel directions to show how His strength should be channeled.
2. This covenant leads to bondage when it is used as a source of strength and power.
 - a. Strength is only in God.
 - b. The Law cannot be put in His place.

II. *Wherein does freedom consist?*

A. Sarah

1. She was a freewoman.

2. Her offspring was free—born of God's promise, not the weakness of the flesh; born not of the doubt, as was Ishmael, but of the trustworthiness of God, as was Isaac.
- B. In the Jerusalem which is above.
1. Not in the Jerusalem "which now is." This is the Israel under the Law, the Israel under the Scribes and Pharisees and Elders of the people, who taught "for doctrine the commandments of men."
 2. But in the Jerusalem "which is above, which is free." This is the Israel which is embraced in the Promise of God (Gen. 3:15; 22:18); embraced in Him who said, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32)

Conclusion

"So then, brethren, we are not the children of the bondwoman, but of the free."

When do we become free? When we cast ourselves on the resources of God and stop trying to take His place. How can a man be free when he is bent upon taking upon himself the past, the present, and the future? How can a man be free if he tries to take the place of the powerplant when he is only the light bulb? "Tell me, ye that desire to be under the Law, do ye not hear the Law?" The Law asks that you be perfect. Of yourself you can't be. When you look for resources outside yourself, what do you find? Are you left in the lurch? No. Doesn't the Scripture say: "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth shall be saved"? Doesn't it say: "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out"? Doesn't it say: "I am come that they may have life and have it more abundantly"?

All this it does say and can say because of what we commemorate in this season: "The Son of Man came to give His life a ransom for many."