

Stewardship 1

November 8, 2020

Hebrews 10:24,25

“So, Here We Go”

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Hebrews 10:24,25

Dear Friends in Christ,

This is the first of two Sundays regarding stewardship. Most of you are quite familiar with our practice of systematic percentage giving, and the importance of maintaining privacy while encouraging giving as a genuine response to God's love in Christ. I'm starting our considerations for this morning with Aesop's Fable entitled *The Sick Man And The Doctor*.

A sick man received a visit from his doctor, who asked him how he was. "Fairly well, doctor," he said, "but I find I sweat a great deal." "Ah," said the doctor, "that's a good sign." On his next visit he asked the same question, and his patient replied, "I'm much as usual, but I've taken to having shivering fits, which leave me cold all over." "Ah," said the doctor, "that's a good sign too." When he came the third time and inquired as before about his patient's health, the sick man said that he felt very feverish. "A very good sign," said the doctor; "you are doing very nicely indeed." Afterward a friend came to see the invalid, and on asking him how he did, received this reply: "My dear friend, "I'm dying of good signs." (Aesop's Fables, World Cloud Classics, 2013, p.143)

When I first read that years ago, I thought to myself, "This isn't a fable about a sick man and the doctor. It's the reality of the whole world; a world tearing itself to pieces in a frenzied grab for good things, good times, a good life, with no clear understanding of what good is! And everyone is going to die *of good signs!*"

SO, HERE WE GO

I. By Way of Introduction.

Dr. Francis Pieper was one of the finest Lutheran theologians ever. In 2007, The Luther Academy of St. Louis published a book of his lectures entitled, "The Church and Her Treasure". The lectures were given at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1891. I will be quoting statements from his Ninth Lecture, specifically from pages 64 and 65. After each quote I will give comment and appropriate Scripture reference. I can only ask that you will listen as carefully as possible because what you will be hearing is the only lasting "good" we possess.

II. The Doctrine of Justification.

Regarding the Doctrine of Justification, Dr. Pieper wrote:

The doctrine of justification is such a difficult doctrine because a Christian, as Luther says, must completely turn from himself. What does this signify? Just consider: the righteousness by which we are justified before God is never within us but remains always outside us. We must trust in this righteousness which we cannot feel or touch; indeed we must trust in it even if we feel quite opposite in our hearts, namely, death and condemnation.

The reality is that sometimes we don't feel the love of God. Sometimes we wonder if God can and will go on forgiving and forgiving the things we think, say and do that we don't want to think, say and do. In and of ourselves, we cannot meet the demands of God's righteousness: perfect obedience. Jesus did it for us. It exists outside us. As Paul writes, "...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." (Rom. 3:22) Regarding what Paul writes we underscore Pieper's words: "...we must trust in it (Christ's perfect life, His righteousness) on our behalf."

Dr. Pieper goes on to say:

The righteousness by which we become justified before God is the righteousness of Christ. This is the righteousness He won for us 1,900 years ago and which he does not pour into us so that we become righteous of ourselves but which he places in the gospel so that we can believe and possess it despite all feelings and thoughts in our own hearts. This is why in practice there is such difficulty with the doctrine of justification. We must be able to follow this practice as it is expressed in the hymn: "I trust the promise Jesus made,/Despite my thoughts all sins are paid." (Unfortunately, we no longer have access to the hymn).

Well, here we remember Paul's statements of agony followed by peace and joy: "For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:18b, 24-25a)

III. Further Clarification.

Dr. Pieper then gives further clarification:

...The fanatics teach quite differently; they speak as if righteousness before God consists in the transformation and renewal within the Christian, which, we agree, does take place in the person who comes to faith in Christ. But for the fanatics, righteousness itself resides in this inward experience of grace. (That is, the person becomes righteous as Christ is righteous and no longer sins.)

So, I always recall. From many years ago, a discussion with two young women, members of a local, popular church who informed me that born again Christians don't sin. I asked them, "How do you understand it when you have bad thoughts about someone, or say things you know God doesn't want you to say? They said, and I quote, "Those are not sins. Those are mistakes." I said, "If a person is truly filled with the righteousness of Christ - perfect obedience to God's law - the person doesn't make mistakes, better known as sins." The conversation ended.

As Pieper stated, transformation and renewal do take place within the person, but the reality of sin is still there. We are sinful.

IV. Lasting Comfort.

And that brings us to Pieper's words of lasting comfort:

To be sure, by God's mercy we sometimes do feel His grace. But this feeling is not the righteousness by which we are justified before God. The righteousness by which we are justified before God remains in the Word and is external to man. It must be received in faith from God's Word. What must we respond then to those tortured souls who exclaim: I feel only death and condemnation in my heart! How can I receive God's consolation and be justified before Him? We must tell them: listen closely, the righteousness by which you wish to become justified before God was obtained by Christ and is present in the gospel. You must believe the gospel. It is not a matter of your good character but of the justification Christ won and proclaimed for you in the gospel. Would you like to receive it? Yes, they reply, we would like to receive it. Then tell them: Well, that takes care of it. Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

I know I have become an old, broken record, but I really couldn't do less than sound those magnificent words the Holy Spirit gave Paul - words for you and me and all who daily wrestle with sin:

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1) I wish we had access to that old hymn: "I trust the promise Jesus made,/Despite my thoughts all sins are paid." We have received the most profound miracle: faith in Christ and, with it, every assurance of forgiveness and entrance into Real Life Everlasting! There isn't one thing of this earth that we have or do that even begins to rival the gift of faith. Not one thing, or a multitude things. None!! So, here we go

V. So, Here We Go.

The pastors have thought a lot about how we have spent most of this year unable to be together in the way we were prior to the pandemic panic; thought a lot about the lack of personal contact and mutual consolation that far surpasses looking at and talking to each other on a screen, or a handful of us spread out all over the sanctuary wearing masks. We think about the words of Scripture that deeply touch us, though ignored by many: "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day (the Great Judgment Day) drawing near." (Heb. 10:24,25)

It's those last words I want to emphasize: "...encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day (Judgment Day) drawing near." We don't want to be like those who remind us that every generation of Christians thought Jesus would return in their time, therefore we need to be serious about life here. Granted, as God's people we need to be serious about the life He gives us here, but the Scripture admonition is clear. Plus, we need to remember that we are 2,000 years closer to Jesus' return, and, as has been repeatedly stated, the upheaval we are seeing is global. Jesus said, "For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." (Mt. 24:37) And Scriptures say of Noah's time: Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence." (Gen. 6:11) Well, does that fit this day? Global!

This is stewardship Sunday. In the light of what we have been given in Christ, we must each ask: "How am I going to support my church in this time of upheaval and the approaching end?"

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott