

I have decided that my preaching needs to follow more directly the pattern of Our Lord. Consequently, I have prepared this morning to preach for three days before distributing communion. I hope you all are prepared to be as faithful as the Four Thousand in the wilderness.

Thinking in this way does cause one to wonder what kept the Four Thousand out there for so long. Their food was meager and running out. They did not, it seems warrant the rebuke which Jesus applies to those who are only interested in the bread: “Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled. Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed.”

These that followed Christ into the wilderness are not so shallow, so ruled by their bellies. They come not for the promise of bread, but to follow and hear Jesus. They have begun to realize the truth of that same teaching of Moses which Our Lord used to counter the temptation of the devil. “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” In fact, this miracle follows the very same pattern as that of God with the people of Israel. In Deuteronomy 8 Moses teaches the people by reminding them, “ And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you *and* test you, to know what *was* in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. <sup>3</sup> So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every *word* that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.”

This is the pattern of Christ. He waits until their food has all but run out, till they are entirely dependent on The Lord’s provision. If he were to send them away now, many would not make it home. There are many who would have left before now. Those who had traveled out to the wilderness to hear the teacher but when their food began to get low, had departed while they still had what they needed. But this great multitude had remained, rightly esteeming the opportunity to follow and hear the words of Christ as more nourishing than bread. These are given manna which they did not know. For they labored not merely for the meat which perishes but for that which endures to everlasting life.

The nature of this everlasting life, this life which comes in spite of the death of the body, is the subject which Paul takes up in chapter six of his epistle to the Romans. Last week we read about the work which is done in the Christian when he is baptized, how he is buried in the death of Christ and then raised to life with Him. This is the life of the Christian, the life which is everlasting, which is fed by the words which proceed from the mouth of God, the life which is both the fruit and source of righteousness.

This life Paul describes as both freedom and slavery. We were set free from sin to be servants or slaves of God. There is no middle way, we are either journeying through the wilderness to the promised land being fed by the

man from Heaven, or we are returning to Egypt saying with the Israelites: "We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick:" There is either freedom in Christ which is also slavery to righteousness or there is slavery to sin which leads to death. We can either feed and sustain that spiritual life to which we are raised in our baptisms, or we can follow the leader which promises us the best of foods.

Paul begins this chapter by asking the question, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" His answer to this question begins with a description of the life of the Christian and then proceeds to a description of the freedom of the Christian. Life and freedom and contrasted with Death and Sin. It is notable that freedom is not contrasted with slavery or servanthood by Paul. Freedom is contrasted to Sin. The man that lives righteously in Christ is totally free even though he may be constrained in his actions by his allegiance and responsibility to the Lord.

Religion then is a necessary service; of course it is a privilege too, but it becomes more and more of a privilege, the more we exercise ourselves in it. The perfect Christian state is that in which our duty and our delight are the same, when what is right and true is natural to us, and in which, as we say in Morning Prayer, God's "service is perfect freedom." And this is the state towards which all true Christians are tending; it is the state in which the Angels stand; entire subjection to God in thought and deed is their happiness; an utter and absolute captivity of their will to His will, is their fulness of joy and everlasting life. This is the nature of the humanity of the incarnation. The human will of Jesus was totally subject to his divine will. This is the kind of humanity that we are to be raised into, as we are raised with Christ.

This connection between eternal life and servanthood to Christ is an important one. Though it may not be articulated in this way, very often the contemporary Christian conception of life in Christ is as shallow as the avoidance of particular major sins and quiet domesticity. Or perhaps it is to be a good conservative politically and socially. Perhaps we live as though, as long as you don't violate any of the Ten Commandments, you are living the Christian life. The problem with all of these conceptions is that they fundamentally conceptualize the Christian responsibility as a negative thing. The avoidance of sin is the essence of our worship. Such a conception seems to agree with Paul that our life in Christ is set free from sin, but then stops short of saying that freedom from sin is slavery to righteousness. The generally good life, not in Egypt, not in the promised land, but comfortable in the wilderness, this is what is envisioned.

Such a notion inevitably makes room for small, seemingly harmless vices. A man may be truthful and honest as a rule, but excuse himself a slight falsehood when the situation is dire and he will avoid trouble or inconvenience as a result. Or perhaps he has learned to control his temper, he is moderate and even most of the time, yet under extreme provocation he lashes out exacting payment for his injury on his fellow man. Perhaps a man allows his eyes and his mind to linger lustfully, yet excuses it because he will go no further. In his work he

accomplishes all that is required of him, but in the areas where accountability is lax, he allows himself to be lax. When he is at prayer he allows his mind to run to all manner of frivolous and foolish ideas and images, but he thinks nothing of it because he is physically present.

The great evil here is not so much that in the course of temptation a man may stumble into sin. The problem is that we may allow ourselves to justify such failings and never even repent of them. A small deception, procrastination, gluttonous overindulgence, a short-tempered outburst, in the context of a generally upright and respectable life, are excused and passed over. In a sense we admit our servanthood to God with caveats. We will follow the general impression of the Christian life, staying out of the great and obvious evils, but taking short day-trips back to Egypt when it seems worthwhile. Again, the danger here is less in the fact of the sin, than in the fact that it is not truly acknowledged. It is never brought before God in confession, never repudiated and God's mercy sought.

This is the kind of religion against which Paul warns. This is why he insists on the necessity of Christians "fulfilling the righteousness of the law;" fulfilling it, because till we aim at complete, unreserved obedience in all things, true servanthood to righteousness, we are not really Christians at all. Hence St. James says, "Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." And our Saviour assures us that "Whosoever shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven;" and that "Except our righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees," which was thus partial and circumscribed, "we shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." And when the young man came to Him, saying that he had kept all the commandments, and asking what he lacked, Our Lord pointed out the "one thing" wanting in him, namely his love of money; and when he would not complete his obedience by giving away his wealth, but went away sorrowful, then, as if all his obedience in other points were of no merit, Christ said, "Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the Kingdom of God?"

This is the real meaning of Christ's interpretation of the law from Matthew 5. Our Lord explains the true intention and meaning of the law. It is not at its core a list of things to avoid. Rather, the law is a template that begins to show what is the fully committed life of the Christian. We are not merely to love our friends, those who love us. Love even those who are your enemies, those whose actions make your life miserable, those who are your persecutors. This is the radical nature of the law, of the new servanthood to which we are called. In the end this teaching and all that came before it in the sermon on the mount is summed up with the command "be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect."

Perfection is the call. Make no allowance for small inconsistencies, short lapses, and minor self-indulgences. Perfect obedience to our perfect master is the goal.

How will this not lead to despair? If we ask of ourselves perfection, knowing that we cannot ever achieve it, how can we not wallow in guilt and self-reproach? We are inclined to shield ourselves from this monumental and insurmountable task by excusing the small and seemingly insignificant ways we fall short. If I can justify half of my sins, then I can more comfortably seek forgiveness from God. This thought, however comes from a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of forgiveness. C.S. Lewis explains it thus:

“I find that when I think I am asking God to forgive me I am often in reality asking Him to do something quite different. I am asking Him not to forgive me but to excuse me. But there is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing. Forgiveness says “Yes, you have done this thing but I accept your apology; I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before.” But excusing says “I see that you couldn’t help it or didn’t mean it; you weren’t really to blame.” If one was not really to blame then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites... The trouble is that what we call asking God’s forgiveness very often really consists in asking God to accept our excuses... and if we forget this, we shall go away imagining that we have repented and been forgiven when all that has really happened is that we have satisfied ourselves with our own excuses.”

God is ever ready to forgive, not to excuse sin. If we come to him with contrite hearts and true repentance he will not fail to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. But we must keep nothing back for ourselves, no fundamental dignity and pride in our own goodness. All that we have and are we must lay down before the Lord and all that is not righteous and holy we must be willing to lay aside for his sake.

There is no room for complacency in the life of Christian servitude. Every time the Lord brings us through one struggle with sin, there is another to face. But rest assured, he will make sure we are nourished for the fight. If we will follow Him out to the wilderness he will not send us home fainting. And there is joy in walking with Christ. By embracing forgiveness the existential insecurity about our own goodness may fade away. We need not search for ways excuse our shortcomings. We may rely on the forgiveness of God and get back into the fight. For if God has forgiven us, set us free from our sin, we are free indeed. This also becomes devotional. Repentance is a part of our practice of prayer. As soon as you are convicted of sin, bring it before the Lord in humble repentance. If every time the accuser brings to mind some failing, we rush to Our Lord in prayer, seeking forgiveness and trusting in the grace He offers, rather than searching for ways to justify ourselves, we will grow in righteousness. We will be drawn further into the life of Christ. God promises that if we seek Him, He will give himself to us. If draw near to Him, He will draw near to us.