

## 9.7.2025 Trinity 12 (2 Corinthians 3:4-9)

A small, remote country parish in southern Ireland didn't seem like the ideal place for the brilliant young graduate to begin his ministry as an Anglican priest. Having completed his studies at Trinity College in Dublin at the age of twenty-two, Henry Francis Lyte, a tall, good looking young man - a classical scholar fluent in French, Greek, and Latin, and a gifted public speaker, certainly had his sights set on what he would consider to be greater opportunities, but it was in that remote area that God would forever shape his life and ministry.

A friend of Lyte's, a fellow clergyman, was terminally ill, and when the young priest was called to his bedside to offer solace and comfort, the dying man confessed to him that he'd begun to re-examine his own life and ministry, as he, on his deathbed, read and studied the New Testament. After sharing his own prayerful study of the Bible, he urged his young friend to search the Scriptures, and to do what he had at last done, to stop relying on religious duty for peace with God, and instead, trust completely in Christ and His power to save. This deathbed confession of his friend and fellow priest brought about a profound change in Lyte. It gave him, for the first time, a truly personal faith in Christ, a faith rooted and grounded not in religious duty, not in strict adherence to a list of commandments from God, but rather in a personal relationship with the Almighty, and this intimate, relational faith inspired him to write a number of magnificent hymns, such as, *Praise, My Soul, The King of Heaven*, the beautiful version of Psalm 103 we sang before our sermon.

It's often the places that we wouldn't choose to go to on our own that prepare us to walk with God. Moses was in the wilderness 40 years before God called him to lead the Israelites in the Exodus out of Egypt, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, falsely accused and imprisoned, and endured years of hardship before he was chosen to govern that nation and save countless people, including his brothers, from famine in that land, and Fr. Henry Francis Lyte was called to serve in a remote country parish where he learned the lesson of a lifetime, the great difference between religious duty and relationship, or to use the words of St. Paul found in today's Epistle, the difference between the letter of the Law - that *kills*, and the spirit - which

*gives life.*

In our Epistle today, St. Paul spoke of the Commandments given on Mount Sinai, the words of the Decalogue that we recited this morning, in what seems to be a very unusual way. He referred to them as a “*ministry of death, written and engraved on stones*” (2 Corinthians 3:7). From Paul’s point of view, the letter of the Law, engraved on those stone tablets by the finger of God, kills. He refers to the Law in this way, as a *ministry of death*, because the Law does such a thorough job of making us aware of our sin - the sin that has brought death because it has separated us from God, it’s made us His enemy, and clearly Paul’s view is ours as well, because after hearing each Command at the beginning of our service this morning, our humble and prayerful response was: *Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law.*

In the letter to the Romans, we read that the “*law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous, and good*” (Romans 7:12), yet these outward commands from God only show us our religious duty, that which must be done, these written words give no grace or strength by which to do or keep them, and further, to all who’ve erred and strayed like lost sheep, the Commandments also reveal the depth of our fall, but again, show us no way by which we might escape this horrible pit. Therefore, in this Epistle we recognize what Fr. Henry Francis Lyte and his good friend and fellow clergyman also recognized, the truth that religious duty without relationship only brings death. The letter of the Law kills. It’s the spirit that gives life.

We saw an example of this truth in the New Testament lesson we read last Sunday, as Jesus repeatedly declared, “*Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!*” (Matthew 23:13-31). Our Lord pronounced these woes of warning and judgement on men who perfectly fulfilled what they believed was their religious duty. The scribes and Pharisees were experts in adhering to every rule and tradition - every letter of the Law. St. Paul pointed this out when he recounted his own history as a Pharisee, saying that, “*as to righteousness under the law*” he was “*blameless,*” but such an external, superficial adherence to the letter of the Law kills, because, as Paul explains, this is an outward righteousness of our own that comes from the Law, as

opposed to an inward righteousness, a transformation of our heart, soul, and mind that's rooted and grounded not in our own effort, but in God's grace, and which "*comes through faith in Christ*" (Philippians 3:6-9).

The scribes and Pharisees mistakenly thought that the Law could make them righteous, but mere outward adherence to the letter of the Law kills. A righteousness of religious duty, without relationship, only brings death, and Jesus made this perfectly clear when He said to His disciples, "*Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 5:20). The scribes and Pharisees were the religious elite, but religious duty doesn't save. Only faith in the Son of God who loves us and gave Himself for us has such power (Ephesians 5:2). I once heard that truth illustrated through a story that compared our human attempts to journey toward heaven apart from a relationship with our Lord, to be like a group of tourists who decided to swim from California to Hawaii. Some of them made it further than others, but in the end, they all drowned, and so it will be for any who try to enter heaven by their own righteous adherence to the letter of the Law, instead of trusting completely in Christ and His power to save.

The *law is holy... righteous, and good*, but the Law doesn't save, it only helps us see how desperately we need God. His grace. His strength. His Spirit that gives life - life abundant and life eternal in Christ Jesus. The letter kills because it reveals to fallen humanity a God infinitely above us, but the spirit gives life by revealing Emmanuel, God with us. It was a priest, on his deathbed, that helped Fr. Henry Francis Lyte realize that we will never find peace with God through religious duty. We will never find peace with God merely through strict, outward adherence to the letter of the Law. Peace with the Father, comes only through intimacy with the Son, by the power of the Spirit.

By the grace of God may we come to understand the commandments as holy and righteous and good, and may the Lord have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law, not as a prideful attempt to save ourselves, but as a humble, obedient response to the One who gave His life to save us.