

“Church Leadership and the Gospel”

Rivers and Lakes Presbytery Meeting
Moline, Illinois
September 28, 2018

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Romans 3:21-28

Prayer of Illumination

O Lord our God, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, that we may be obedient to your will and live always for your glory; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Isaiah 52:14-53:12

[14] As many were astonished at you—

**his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—**

[15] so shall he sprinkle many nations.

**Kings shall shut their mouths because of him,
for that which has not been told them they see,
and that which they have not heard they understand. (ESV)**

[1] Who has believed what he has heard from us?

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

[2] For he grew up before him like a young plant,

and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.

[3] He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

[4] Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.

[5] But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.

[6] All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

[7] He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.

[8] By oppression and judgment he was taken away;

and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?

[9] And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

[10] Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.

[11] Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

[12] Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors. (ESV)

[21] But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—[22] the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, [25] whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. [26] It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

[27] Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. [28] For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. (ESV)

I. Introduction

The Mississippi River passes east and west through the Quad Cities, which means that the interstates have to go north and south to cross it. Therefore, if you want to go *north*, take I-74 *West*, and if you want to go *south*, take I-74 *East*. But whichever direction you want to go, just don't try to get on the new half-finished bridge—in a few moments, you'd be going neither north nor south, but straight down, and this would put you in full immersion.

Welcome again to the Quad Cities. We're so glad you made the trip to come here. Looking out, I see many people in this sanctuary who are involved in

church leadership in one way or another. I know I can learn much from each of you, and I would more ably profit this evening from *listening* to you who preach, rather than preaching to the preachers. What then would God have me say to such a gathering?

You who are ruling elders have many responsibilities in your own lives, and you have taken on the additional challenge of serving on Session. The fact that you have come to a presbytery meeting lifts you to another level. It is not every elder who is willing to drive what might be a long distance for many of you—all for a two-day meeting of church government! You are familiar with things like per-member asking, annual budgets, annual congregational meetings, committee work, Sunday school curricula, and many other necessary concerns of the local congregation.

You who are pastors also have many responsibilities. You are familiar with Session meetings, sermon preparation, visitation, weddings, funerals, counseling, sacraments, interpersonal relations, committee meetings, and a host of other cares and concerns.

And even if you are *not* a ruler elder or a teaching elder, everyone here is probably a very busy person, who has a heart for the church. I'll bet that nearly everyone here serves a great deal for the advancement of Christ's kingdom.

But be careful of the spiritual danger here. Martha scurried to and fro, but Mary chose the better thing when she sat at Jesus' feet.¹ Do not let the busyness of service become the basis for spiritual pride. Do you keep the sabbath, for example? Do you take a full day off each week for rest and to honor the Lord? True, we have a greater flexibility about it in the New Testament, but the fact remains that the sabbath made it into the first table of the Ten Commandments. A sabbath day is for our rest, and it is a means of honoring God. When you take a day off, you are acknowledging that the world can get by somehow without you. God is still in charge. We acknowledge that when we take a rest. But if you think that the world will come to an end if you take a day off, then you have elevated *yourself* to the status of God. Trust the Lord enough to take a break. Honor him as Lord, by resting—for soon enough, your body shall rest in your grave as in your bed.

Do not forget that we are dust, and to the dust we shall return. For a time and season we flourish like grass, and while we do, the Lord will empower us with his Holy Spirit to advance his kingdom—but it is *his* work. We are the tools he uses. He remembers our fragility, and has made provision for it. Let us acknowledge our weakness, therefore, and rely on the Lord, for in our weakness, his power is made perfect, and his grace is sufficient.²

¹ Luke 10:38-42.

² II Corinthians 12:9.

II. Christ Crucified

When a football team starts having trouble, the coaches will often return to the basics. They go back to practicing tackling, blocking, holding the football, and catching it. Without the solid execution of these skills, everything else falls apart. At 1-2, I think my Seattle Seahawks could do with a little of this.

Likewise, in our Christian ministries, it is important to return to the first principles—the basics of the faith. For in delivering the Gospel to the masses, sometimes we forget that it is for us, too. As a pastor, how often do you get to sit in worship and hear the Gospel proclaimed? Have you forgotten that you, too, are a child of God—that the Lord loves *you*, and that the cross and resurrection applies to you, as well? No, really—we are not going to heaven because we are pastors, elders, or leaders in the church. Don't let the devil convince you of that lie, for those who buy into that one may well someday hear Christ say, "I never knew you." For your service, no matter how wonderful it is, is insufficient to merit the forgiveness of your sins and the reward of heaven. Our Christian ministry *follows* our salvation, and does not *earn* it. Your salvation, pastor, is to be found in Christ alone, based on *his* merits alone. You are not saved based on your own accomplishments for the Lord. Rather, you are saved based on Christ's accomplishments for *you*. And he *does* love you, and he *does* care about all your struggles and anxieties. Look with fresh eyes at the Son of God, who laid down his life voluntarily *for you*.

A. Suffering and Indignity

God in human flesh experienced suffering and indignity. He did this for you—for *your* forgiveness, pastor. For *you*, elder. For *you*—*whoever* you are! And if you carry the cross of Christ, then you should not be dismayed when life's smooth flow gets disrupted by crises and frustrations and problems beyond count. Is the servant greater than the master? Will you get off scot-free? Is not the devil still active? Why should you have smooth sailing all of your days when spiritually, flaming arrows are striking all around you? Rather, be concerned if your life is all ease and comfortable routine—*for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*³

Christ's appearance was disfigured. He was beaten and bloodied and flayed with whips. Here is your Maker stepping in front of the whip, to shield you from the punishment you deserve, so that the blows fall on him, so that his blood runs over you. The love of a parent for their baby is nothing compared to this devotion.

Jesus Christ had no beauty or majesty that stopped people in the street. He didn't look all perfect, like a Hollywood magazine cover. He became an ordinary guy. He was despised and rejected—and if you proclaim his message, then some will despise and reject you, too, for the world and those who belong to it cannot stand Christ. He is the aroma of death to them. Your job is not to get every single person to like you. If *God* is happy with you, then that is enough.

³ Matthew 7:13-14.

Jesus was a man of sorrows, well acquainted with suffering. He knew grief, he knew pain, sadness, and frustration. Do not think that you are sailing in uncharted territory when your heart enters these troubled waters. Your Lord has gone before you, and he will bring you through to the far shore, too.

Here is your God, walking through suffering and indignity, *for you*—not because you serve him, not because you've preached a thousand sermons, and not because you said ok to serving as committee chair when everyone else was examining their shoes. He suffered and died on the cross before you ever did any of this. God did this for you simply because he decided to. He loved you from before the foundation of the world, and he had a plan for your salvation before you were even conceived. You have value because God made you in his image. In God's sight, you were worth saving *before* you ever did anything for him. God loves you for *you*, and will glorify his name through you.

B. What He Accomplished

It is old news, but Good News. It is the central message of all our sermons week by week, and yet it is fresh every morning. Christ died to forgive us for our sins. He rose again to grant us new life. According to Isaiah 52:15, in his atoning sacrifice, Christ sprinkled many nations (*sprinkled*, and not immersed, I might add!). Christ took up *our* infirmities, he carried *our* sorrows, he bore the iniquity of us all, and he was pierced for *our* transgressions, such that he died. *For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.* Our punishment was on him, and through that punishment, he brought us peace. By his wounds we are healed—for he was

the once-and-for-all sacrifice of atonement for our sins. Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers found their fulfillment at Golgotha, in the world's final guilt offering, by which Christ justified many, as Paul explains in Romans 3. This is God's grace, received by faith. Salvation is based on what Christ has done, and not our own merits. We contribute nothing but our sins, and the glory belongs to God alone.

III. Christ Resurrected

A. His Exaltation and Rewards

13 See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. 11 After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. What else is this but a prophecy of Christ's resurrection? Isaiah 53 goes to great lengths to depict the death and burial of the Messiah, *followed by* his resurrection! How else could he see the light of life after his burial? How could it be any longer than the third day, when Leviticus says that a dead sacrifice remains holy only until the third day? *12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.*

B. Our Participation

Christ received exaltation and rewards from the Father because he laid down his life for the remnant of the people of God. The glorious fact of the matter is

that if we believe in Jesus, then we have been born again and united to him through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and so just as our sins were dealt with at the cross, so we shall participate in Christ's life and rewards at the empty tomb. Isaiah prophesied this glorious event: *10 He will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.* The offspring of Christ are those born again by faith, born unto eternal life. We who belong to Jesus Christ are true offspring indeed, for we have been born anew in the second and perfect Adam, destined to be heirs and co-regents with Christ over the new heavens and the new earth. How marvelous this is! And God has done it for us out of his sheer grace! Despite humble circumstances and daily toils here in this world, never forget the awesome dignity and unimaginable joys God has in store for us!

IV. Responding to Grace

Hearing this Good News, therefore, take reassurance in the fact that we are justified by *Christ*, and not by our status in Christian leadership, or any other criteria. Relax in God's promises, taking encouragement and joy from the certainty of their fulfillment. It depends on God, not on us, and so it is assured.

Likewise, as you allow your spirit to settle comfortably on the rock of Christ, do not be surprised if from time to time you receive treatment similar to Christ's. Life and ministry will be hard. You will struggle. You will suffer. You will face hardship. If life is good for the moment, then use this season of calm to build your life most firmly upon the Rock of Jesus Christ. For it is only a matter of time until the floods come. I've seen a lot of news footage of floods. I've seen cars washed away, carried off down the river. Floods tend to come

suddenly. The time to prepare for them is beforehand, when the sun is shining and all is well. Make the most of the time, seeking the Lord and trusting in him, for the days are evil. Cultivate an indestructible joy, based on God's grace and promises to us, and seek the spiritual peace that only the Lord can give—it is a peace dependent on his plans for us in eternity, rather than our shifting circumstances or fallible efforts.

Knowing therefore where we are going, based on what God has done for us, we can let go of anxiety, we can humbly entrust our work to the Lord, and we can live with generous attitudes. For if the one who made everything from nothing has adopted us his sons and daughters and made us heirs with Christ of all things, then we will never be in want. Our cup overflows. We are stewards of inexhaustible riches—and so in faith we can share generously of our time, talents, and treasures. Giving shows gratitude to God for his gifts to us in the past, and it demonstrates trust in the Lord to provide for us in the future.

V. Conclusion

This is a roomful of very capable people—but never forget this—strip away your titles, your status, your service and every other thing. None of that will save you. The message that you proclaim in roles of Christian leadership is the same message that applies to *you*, and that will carry you through those last moments on your deathbed: Jesus Christ died and rose again even for *you*, and trusting in him, you may be assured of forgiveness and righteousness and life everlasting. Do not lose perspective. Cling to this central truth in your life, and then all the rest will fall into its proper place. We are all sheep, serving the

Great Good Shepherd, who leads us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Glory to God most high!

Alleluia!

Amen.