

To God Alone Be The Glory

You know how the world works. It runs on a very basic principle: “You do, you get. You do, you get.” We don’t have to be trained in this way of thinking. It’s hardwired into our brains from birth: “Look, Mommy, see what I did?” “Good girl!” “Good boy!” You do, you get. In school we do our homework and we get a good grade, and it feels good. We do a good job at work and we get promoted, and it feels good. We expect to get rewarded for doing good. You can hardly be an American these days without the words, “I deserve it,” alighting on your lips.

“But doesn’t God expect us to be good?” Yes. In fact, God threatens to punish all who transgress his commandments. That’s the stick. And here’s the carrot: God promises grace and every blessing to all who keep his commandments. God really does want us to be good people.

But through today’s Epistle Lesson, the Holy Spirit challenges us with this very important question: why? Why be good? Let’s learn from what happened in Antioch.

Ancient Antioch was a city located on what is now the border between the modern-day countries of Türkiye and Syria. Antioch was one of the first places where Gentiles converted to Christianity in large numbers. Paul and Barnabas and several other men were pastors of the

church there. They taught the people the same truths you and I have been taught: “The Savior promised in the Old Testament has come. He’s Jesus of Nazareth. He lived a sinless life as your Substitute and died on the cross as your Substitute with the result that your sins are all paid for. So turn away from your sins (repent of them, repudiate them, make them a part of your past but not of your present). Do this because through faith in Jesus you are God’s child. You are an heir of eternal life for free. You don’t need to do anything to get it. Don’t try to earn God’s gift—he already gave it to you.”

Imagine the Christians in Antioch discussing the implications of this good news. “Hey, if we don’t need to do anything to get God’s favor now or to get a place in heaven someday... If we don’t have to do in order to get, then we are free from all the laws God gave to Israel through Moses. The only laws of God that we still need to keep are the laws that Jesus or his apostle repeated: laws like love God and his Word, respect your parents, sex within marriage, no stealing or slander or discontent. These few repeated laws apply to all people of all time because God wants to protect everyone from evil behaviors and thoughts. But if God didn’t command or forbid something, we are free.” The Christians in Antioch relaxed into this Christian liberty, living good lives out of thanks to their Savior Jesus. No special emphasis was placed on Old Testament ceremonies. People were free to observe them or not. If Jewish Christians

preferred to eat only kosher* food at their every Sunday pot-luck meals, that was fine. It was just as okay if they wanted to eat one of the pork chops or ham sandwiches that a Gentile family had brought to share. *[I mean this in the sense of “clean” as defined in the Pentateuch.]

Then the apostle Peter came for a visit. At first he ate with the Gentiles. That was a big deal because it went against how Peter had grown up. He had been taught that Gentiles were “unclean pig-dogs.” But Peter had recently been taught by the Lord not to look down on the Gentiles, not to consider them unclean, because Jesus paid for Gentile sins the same way he paid for Jewish sins (Acts 10). So when Peter came to Antioch, he initially moved about freely in Gentile circles. In this way he illustrated the gospel implication that Old Testament customs and ceremonies, and even Old Testament requirements, have no inherent worth and are not required for salvation. Jesus already fulfilled them by his death on the cross.

But then certain men came from James. Who’s James? James was Jesus’ brother. He was such a dominant figure in the Jerusalem church that his name became synonymous with the church in Jerusalem. So when the Bible reports that “*certain men came from James,*” this was a way of saying that these men came from the church in Jerusalem. Now, it’s not necessarily the case that James authorized these men to come to Antioch and push for Gentiles to keep the laws of Moses. In

Acts 15 James agrees to teach that salvation comes to us by grace alone and not by our good works. These men from the church in Jerusalem may also have stated their agreement with “salvation by grace alone.” Nevertheless they felt strongly that people must still obey the laws of Moses (the Old Testament).

Peter was afraid of these men. Apparently he thought they could cause trouble for him back home by saying something like, “Ya, that Peter, we saw him eatin’ with Gentiles in Antioch.” Peter had already been criticized by other Jewish Christians for going to visit Cornelius, the Roman Centurion (Acts 11). I don’t know why he didn’t give the same answer this time as last, but he caved in rather than standing firm on the Lord’s principles. He withdrew from the Gentiles and wouldn’t eat with them any longer. He reverted to the Jewish customs in which he had grown up, acting like these customs are required for salvation. Soon the other Jewish Christians in Antioch noticed Peter’s behavior and began to withdraw from their Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ. Even Barnabas [“son of encouragement”], Paul’s missionary companion, felt the pressure and changed his pattern. These men knew better, but they followed Peter’s example anyway. As a result the Gentile Christians felt compelled to do as Peter was doing and follow Jewish customs or else lose their connection to Jesus (they thought). Things were getting mixed up. Christians in Antioch were back to the basic principle of the world: “You do, you get,”

even though that's not how God's kingdom works.

Our modern society has become intolerant of discrimination against ethnic groups, and I'm glad of it. Our culture has also developed an aversion to the idea that one group may force its biases or customs on another. We keep hearing that each individual has dignity, and each ethnic culture has equal value. But please notice how the apostle Paul approaches the situation in Antioch. As important as cultural concerns are, Paul objects to Peter's discrimination on a different basis. Paul reminds everyone that, before God, no human work or activity has any merit, not even Jewish customs and ceremonies. Pressuring Jewish customs on the Gentiles is a sin, not because of multiculturalism, but because it undermines the good news about Jesus. This error can destroy souls if not stopped.

Normally when a Christian sins, Jesus wants another Christian who saw the sin to talk to the straying brother or sister privately in hopes of lovingly leading the fellow believer to repent, to cling to Christ for forgiveness, and to walk with Christ in newness of life. We Christians hold each other accountable like this regularly—it is the height of love to admonish and encourage and build one another up in Christ. This proper Christian discipline helps us all stay connected to Jesus. But in Antioch Peter was sinning in a public way. So it was appropriate for him to be corrected in public. Paul's message to

Peter was basically: “Come on now, Peter! We Jewish believers don't trust in our own ability to keep the Old Testament ordinances and ceremonies. We know that our salvation rests only on what Jesus did. So if we Jewish Christians don't rely on God's Old Testament law anymore for salvation, why should the Gentiles be pressured to keep the law, as if they should trust in their own ability to fulfill the law instead of trusting in Christ?”

Today people might ask it this way. “What about building low income housing, feeding the hungry, and drilling wells for drinking water in third-world countries? What about helping others rebuild after the hurricane? What about random acts of kindness? What about being a positive, optimistic person? Do you mean to tell us that none of these activities bring us closer to God? Are you saying nothing we do can make God happy with us?”

That's right. Doing good to others is important because God says we are to love one another. We are to love even those who hate us. But these good deeds do nothing to get God to give us a place in heaven. If they did, then Christ died for no good reason. If your good deeds can get God to love you, then salvation is at least partly up to you—you must do something to get saved. This, of course, is the way the world thinks, and it is the opposite of what the Bible teaches: “Jesus did, you get. Jesus did, you get.”

Some of you who are well-trained in the Bible doctrine of “grace righteousness” are no doubt wondering, “How could Peter revert to the notion that good deeds can gain favor with God?” But it’s easy to do. In fact, unless you are out of the ordinary, you still have some of this thinking running around in your brain from time to time. Why? because our sinful flesh will never be convinced that we humans have nothing to gain with God by our good works. The sinful flesh is always looking for a way to get credit for doing good, rather than giving God the glory.

Sometimes it sounds like this: “I’m so proud of myself, God. I gave you a generous offering. I also expressed my unity with the people of this church by coming to worship. Where’s my reward, God?” Or sometimes fear plays a part: “I better not do this bad thing or else God will turn away from me. I better keep doing good deeds because I don’t know when I’ve done enough good to make God happy. Keep at it, you!” Or sometimes anger plays a role: “God, what did I do to deserve this?”, as if to say, “God, you’re not doing a very good job of blessing me. Slide on over and let me up there on the throne. I think I can do better.” When a person dies younger than we think they should, we’re ready to tell God that he’s not being fair. Sometimes a twisted form of arrogance plays a role: “I know God forgives me, but I haven’t forgiven myself yet. Maybe after I feel like I’ve been sad long enough, I will.”

Really? Your forgiveness is more important than God’s forgiveness?

There’s a much better way to think about all of this. It’s the new way of thinking that the Holy Spirit works in us through God’s Word and the Sacraments. “Jesus did, you get; rejoice and live for Jesus.”

The apostle Paul says it this way: ¹⁹*Through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.* In other words, when the Ten Commandments say, “You shall” and “You shall not,” I can see that I have done the opposite. What do I deserve for my disobedience? Punishment. Forever. When I accept this truth, my sinful flesh can no longer live. It dies. Through the law, I die to the law. So I say: ²⁰*I (i.e. my sinful flesh), I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live—the old me no longer lives. No, but Christ, my Savior from sin, lives in me.* I am now the new me, the new creation. *The life I live in the body, I LIVE BY FAITH IN THE SON OF GOD, who loved me and gave himself for me.* Jesus did, I get, so now I rejoice and live for Jesus. That’s why I do good works. That’s why I give a day’s work for a day’s wage. That’s why I don’t take pay under the table. That’s why I apologize and change my behavior when I have wronged others. That’s why I let go of my anger when others have wronged me. That’s why I give of my time for the gospel ministry of our church. I love God because he loved me first. My life is now joy in Jesus. **I LIVE BY FAITH IN THE SON OF THE GOD.**