

+ In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti + Amen.

Text: John 14:21

Theme: Practical Christianity



Dear followers of Him who is the way, and the truth and the life,

People are pragmatic by necessity if not by nature. So, it's understandable that many would take a practical approach to God and Christianity. They ask such questions as, "What difference will it make in my life if I believe in God?" Let's put aside the eternal destiny considerations of heaven or hell and just focus on the present implications. (After all, who wouldn't say they believe in God if they were convinced the only alternative without Him was ending up in hell?) And let's focus on the present circumstances employing the terms Jesus uses today. He speaks of loving, knowing, and obeying God. How is it possible to know God, love God, follow God, and obey God? Doing so inevitably has very real, tangible consequences for our lives.

Show me a Bible verse that says, "Once you're a believer life is guaranteed to go better." We should not try to promote or market Christianity with claims that it's practical, useful, or worst of all, a charter or endowment for prosperity. The cynical enquiry of "how Christianity can help me?" cannot be addressed by trying to satisfy the skepticism tangibly. Unbelief is not cured by arguments for utility. It is not answered with logic. It is overcome by truth. The contented ego is not shaken from its stronghold by the seduction of usefulness, but by unanswerable condemnation and self-denying, incorruptible love. Only God is that love. Only Christ reveals it. Only the Holy Spirit makes it accessible.

As we continue to work our way through the latter chapters of John's gospel we're hearing more about the Holy Spirit. It's not surprising because Pentecost is only two weeks off. The Holy Spirit is key to following God quite aside from whether we think it's practical to do so. What's telling is that the Holy Spirit doesn't make Jesus redundant. The Holy Spirit has nothing to teach you except the love of Jesus. But in teaching you the love of Christ He has more than He can teach you in a thousand lifetimes.

Why do we need the Spirit? Let's look at core biblical truth. The Bible says you must repent. This truth is not really up for debate. Except for those who think salvation will automatically happen for everyone, it is widely accepted. Contrition, true sorrow for sin, is necessary before one can genuinely receive the forgiveness of sins. So, repentance is mandatory. But can *we* repent? Here there is confusion, disagreement, and division. To state the question more precisely, can a human being under the natural powers of the human will turn him or herself

from servitude to sin to trust in the promises of God? Here servitude to sin need not mean pursuing an openly ungodly life but only that life is lived without reference to, or care of, the will of God. In short, can we turn from unbelief to faith under our own power? And, can we repeatedly bend our own wills back to God in true repentance?

The biblical answer is an unequivocal no. But, as just mentioned, many Christians falsely think the human will does have such natural ability. Yet, the Scripture says, *“The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.”*<sup>1</sup> And again, *“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”*<sup>2</sup> Or, to use Jesus' own words today, *“The world cannot accept [the Holy Spirit], because it neither sees Him nor knows Him.”*<sup>3</sup> Stated generally, original sin means that a person is unable, by nature, to truly know, love, or trust in God or turn to Him. We are spiritually incapacitated from the time of birth. Even spiritually dead. Understanding this underscores the importance of baptism which is a life-giving spiritual gift. St. Peter says today that the deliverance wrought in baptism is akin to the rescue of Noah's family at the time of the flood- a divine intervention.

So yes, God does ask, even demands that we do the impossible. He demands that we recognize our misplaced trust and redirect it to the proper place, God Himself. But this is exactly what we are unable to do. God demands the humanly impossible. Why? It doesn't seem fair. He demands this so that we completely despair of any hope of saving ourselves or contributing even in the tiniest measure to our own salvation. You see, if we were able to convert ourselves, if we were able to recognize God's goodness, His mercy in Christ, to initially choose Him, to decide for Him under our own steam, through our own independent decision-making, then we would have already taken a big step towards our salvation. And surely we would deserve some credit- at least a little!

But the Holy Spirit will not be robbed of His majesty. And Christ will not be made redundant. No individual will be given credit or receive praise for his or her own conversion or the conversion of someone else. Claiming to have converted someone else can be a dizzying exaltation of one's ego. Believing you have converted yourself is an overt claim, even if unrecognized, to possess divine power. If we deludedly think we can save ourselves, we are deifying ourselves. This is the opposite of godliness, it is blasphemy. It undermines and even eliminates the need for Christ's sacrificial work.

Without the Spirit we cannot repent. Without the Spirit we cannot believe. And without such faith we would have no serious interest in the will of God- what He says, or what it means to follow Him- practical or not. Repentance isn't a one-off thing, and neither is faith. It's hard to express these biblical truths more winsomely and directly than Luther does in his Third Article explanation. *“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”*<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps you're thinking at this point that the sermon is too narrowly focused? When do we come in? What's our part? Doesn't the Bible say we all have a role to play? Yes, but until we see what only the Holy Spirit can show us, until we believe that Jesus is the indispensable component of the equation, any calculation will always be false regardless of the other components. Until we see that He is the head of the body, all the other parts of the body are unable to function, they have no direction, no coordination, no purpose. A body cannot live without a head.

A particular financial institution had professional, honest, and well-trained staff, a safe and useable facility, a reliable security system, and all the structures and protocols in place to meet the needs of customers. But it had one problem. It didn't have any money. Even a well-run institution without money is not a bank. If it has no money it has nothing to loan, nothing to debit, nothing to credit, cannot collect any fees or give any grants, it is not really a bank. A bank without money is just a building with people and other assets. A plan of salvation without Jesus is an exercise in futility, and a tragic one at that.

That doesn't mean your part in the picture is unimportant, but it is completely contingent. Without Him we are like a body without a head, like a bank without any money. But with, and in, and through Him we are part of a marvelous and mysterious reality- the fellowship of believers- and everyone has their part. Believers do follow God and seek His will. Maybe you excel at listening, or you're more skilled at explaining. Maybe showing hospitality is your specialty. Perhaps giving is a capacity you've been blessed with and it fills you with joy to be generous? Maybe you're best at one-on-one or better at coordinating groups? Perhaps you prefer to work behind-the-scenes, or maybe being in the front row doesn't fess you? Possibly your best efforts involve high energy periodic bursts of activity? Or maybe slow and steady suits you just fine?

Regardless, you can pursue the following of God's will fearlessly. There is nothing that you can sacrifice that Christ can't restore. Jesus said to His anxious disciples today, *"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."*<sup>5</sup> Here is the pure, sweet comfort of the gospel. If you do not have a favourite Bible verse perhaps you'd like to consider this one? Dear friends, the one, holy, Christian and apostolic church is an orphanage for sinners. Believers are cut-off, abandoned, deserted by the world, and left for dead by Satan. Those who do not give allegiance to the world's agenda are deserted by it. But you are kept by God. You are possessed by Him. You are part of an orphanage with the King of the universe as the head of the house. You are not fatherless; you have divine patronage. And you have life in His Son. Jesus says, *"Because I live, you also will live."*<sup>6</sup> We believe in Christ and follow Him not because it's practical to do so, but because His teaching is truth. We are gripped by the immortal love of the crucified and risen One. Amen.

+ In nomine Jesu +

Sixth Sunday of Easter

17 May 2020

Reverend Darrin L. Kohrt

<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:7

<sup>3</sup> John 14:17

<sup>5</sup> John 14:18

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:14

<sup>4</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism*

<sup>6</sup> John 14:19

