

“YOU NEVER NEED TO ASK ‘DOES GOD LOVE ME?’”

Message for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

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1 KINGS 3: 5-12 ☿ ROMANS 8: 26-39 ☿ MATTHEW 13: 31-33, 44-52

MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATION OF EACH HEART BE ACCEPTABLE IN THY SIGHT, O LORD, OUR STRENGTH AND OUR REDEEMER. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Show of hands: how many sinners do we have in church this morning? Don't be bashful; raise your hand if you're a sinner. Before we get into my message, I know, I know, how many sinners are present this morning. All of you, and yes, including me! But something or actually someone happened that changed all that.

Our past, present, and future are all transformed because of Him! Because of Jesus.

Since God is without sin – we must be free from sin also, if we are to spend now and eternity with Him. If we are to experience the Salvation that He has to offer, we must be holy as He is holy. We need to be justified. "Just as if I had never sinned" is what justified basically means. I like the way that word is used, justified, just as if I'd never sinned.

You sin and feel unworthy of God's forgiveness and you feel that you must make it up to Him, in some way. You need to justify yourself before coming to Him. We can punish ourselves in a multitude of ways in an attempt to make ourselves right before a Just God.

Do you know what Scripture says, with regard to God's Righteousness, "In Your court, O God, who can stand up and justify himself?" And the answer, of course, is nobody!

It has been rightly said, "Nothing will satisfy the conscience of man that does not first satisfy the conscience of God".

Our attempts at punishing ourselves will never appease God, or us, for that matter; we simply compound our sinfulness by rejecting God, and we do it over and over. And we reject the Grace He has offered.

We just do not see the horror of sin. We don't understand just how much it grieves our Loving Father. We often think of sin as a particular wrongdoing, over which we constantly struggle – but if that is the extent of our understanding of sin, we are gravely uninformed. You and I think it's too much fun to sin, right? How then, can we be justified?

There is a righteousness that reveals the character of God – And that comes through the Law. The Law is the out-shining of God Himself. But the Law brings God's judgment with it. It convicts of sin.

Under the Law there is no justification.

We know about sin because God has told us about it in His Law. There we are faced with His very character, and we see that there is a huge gulf between our character and His character. By looking into the Law, we see, looking back at us the most vile, hideous creatures, who have no hope of satisfying God's demands.

You know, Paul would never go against God's unchangeable Law. It is eternal! But, he does speak of a righteousness of God that declares a sinner to be righteous. And Paul said he was the chief of sinners.

We say God can do anything! And yet there are some things which God cannot do, and one of them is to let sin go unpunished. God is incapable of not judging everyone who commits sin.

Paul says, by the Law came the knowledge of sin and the decree that it must be punished. On the cross, Christ became us, and took upon Himself our punishment! Oh the wonder of it! God became man, for the sole purpose of delivering us from the penalty of sin. He took upon Himself the sins of the world!! He loves us that much.

I love Romans 8. Verse 27: And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. The very next verse, 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.' Verse 31, 'What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

Romans 8:32 tells us that God abandoned Christ, delivered Him up. It says that, "He (who) did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, how will he not with him also give us everything else?" Another key verse, 'Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us.' Then Paul says something to let us know how sure he is. It's not something he read in the paper or heard on the news or read in a Bible commentary but something he felt; I am convinced, he knows without a doubt, I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I asked you earlier to raise your hand if you were a sinner. I have another question but I'd never ask you to raise your hand and that question is 'Would you abandon your child?' Forget those horrible stories on the news about the family that locked away 16 kids or the ones who allowed the 14 years old girl to literally starve to death! It's in the news all the time but...

Christ as man, when He became our sin, our shame, our impurity, our evil and our rebellion, on that cross, called out to His Father, "My God, My God why have you forsaken Me!". Jesus in effect was saying, I am every man that has, is or will live, and I am bearing the punishment for all their past, present and future sins – God, don't abandon Me to this darkness!

God didn't permanently abandon Him, for on the 3rd day He raised Him from the dead. That He might be just in justifying the one who has faith in Jesus. That's why Paul says "I am convinced."

There is therefore now no condemnation to those in Christ Jesus. Each one of us can be justified in the eyes of God, through faith in His Son, Jesus. Does God love me? The cross proves all of it; he does.

Let's ponder anew what Christ's death has accomplished for us, to really think about what his death meant, why Paul said "I am convinced" as we come to the Lord's table in a few minutes. These emblems, the bread and the wine, are for those of us who have placed our trust in the risen Lord. Those of us who are justified, because of what this feast represents. For at this time we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again. The bread symbolizing His body broken for us and the cup symbolizing His blood shed for us – the blood by which we are

washed clean. God tells us that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin.

The past few weeks we've looked into the parables of Jesus in our Gospel readings. Matthew tells us that Jesus was sitting by the sea. A large crowd gathered around him to hear him speak or see him perform a miracle. "The Sea of Galilee was one of His favorite places to preach to large crowds by using a boat as His podium. The water was a sounding board and the sloping hills and curving coves where people sat was a natural amphitheater."

When I read today's Gospel, I had to wonder about those disciples. Were they treating Jesus the way I might have treated my late wife, Joyce, just nodding my agreement without really understanding just so Jesus would move on to something they really did get?

Jesus asked the disciples, 'Have you understood all this?' after telling them several obscure parables to describe God's reign in the world. He told them the kingdom was like a mustard seed, like yeast, like treasure hidden in a field, like fine pearls, or like net tossed out to sea where the good catch is sorted from the bad afterwards.

Imagine being a disciple. I would imagine their heads were spinning at this point. The kingdom is like what? They, like we, wanted to know how Jesus was going to change the world. They wanted to know how Jesus was going to help them get rid of their oppressors. They wanted to know how Jesus was going to bring about a revolution that would change the world as they experienced it. Bottom line they wanted to know how Jesus would overthrow the worldly government that ruled over them. How could a mustard seed, some yeast, some hidden treasure, pearls, and sorting out the catch of the day accomplish any of this?

Jesus wasn't concerned with revolution against the earthly powers. Replacing one human institution with another human institution, even if the new institution is more benevolent and generous to the least of these than the previous one, would not usher in God's realm.

No Jesus was inviting his disciples, and us, to view the world in a different light, to change our perspective. It's not big revolutions that change the world, but little revolutions with the hearts and minds of every human being in the world. Small things like mustard seeds become imposing bushes.

You cooks and bakers know that just a tiny bit of yeast can yield an enormous amount of bread, enough to feed multitudes. The kingdom is of such great value that when we find it, we'll sell all we have to own it. Worldly goods are nothing, when compared to the spiritual riches God's realm brings to us and to the world. God helps us sort out our daily catch, tossing the bad things aside that would distract us from working to accomplish God's will in our lives and in the world.

Have you understood all this? Jesus asked his disciples and continues to ask us. Have we understood that God's realm, his Kingdom, is not about worldly riches, but about the abundant riches of the Spirit?

Have we understood that God's kingdom is about gladly giving away ourselves and all we have to anyone and everyone who asks it of us? Have we truly understood, as Paul told the Romans, that no earthly power finally separates us from God's realm?

Have you understood all this? The disciples said they understood. But then, they and those who came after them, spent the next few hundred years proving that they didn't really get it. Church fathers spent centuries arguing over Jesus' divinity and humanity, over how or why his death was redemptive, over whether his mother was a virgin, and over a myriad of other doctrinal arguments instead of paying attention to the mustard seed, the yeast, the hidden treasure, or the pearl of great value that needed to be cultivated in their own hearts. While they argued, people starved.

Have you understood all this? We have, only when we spend less time arguing about who Jesus is and what he means and instead get to work obeying his commandment to love each other, and stop pursuing worldly ways to bring about God's kingdom.

Have you understood all this?

Most scholars believe that the Gospel of Matthew was written after the fall of Jerusalem between 70 and 85 A.D. Matthew is writing to an audience of Jewish and Gentile Christians who are troubled by the destruction of Jerusalem and the resulting chaos. They are wondering why evil exists along with good. They see the evil in our world and the pain people inflict on one another, even in the church. Why doesn't God do something? We know God is loving and holy. So why does He hold back His hand of justice? Why does He permit so much wrongdoing and suffering?

Matthew uses these parables of Jesus to explain why the “word” of Jesus, the “seed” of the gospel, the message of His resurrection is not accepted by all. These parables provide answers to Christian hearts, minds and communities in the 70 & 80’s after the fall of Jerusalem.

Each parable begins with “the kingdom of heaven”. In Jesus’ day the Jews knew the prophecies in Daniel and Ezekiel and they were expecting a conquering hero. Each time Jesus used the phrase, “the kingdom of heaven” His words stirred memories of bright banners, glittering armies, the gold and ivory of Solomon’s day, the nation of Israel restored. And God who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. May God bless you as you let him clean your heart and sweep the doubt away with his Word.

AMEN!!