

The Way of Righteousness: Forgiveness and Faith

A Sermon by Kyle G. Jones for the 17th Sunday After Pentecost

“Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths.”¹ So we pray with David in Psalm 25. And, how fitting a prayer to pray together this day as we celebrate and commemorate our confirmation and first communion students. Each of them has been shown God’s way which is not a secret, but rather, gets obscured by sin.

We need to be reminded of it again and again because in the course of life’s joys and struggles we find these words in Isaiah also ring true, “‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord.”²

But thanks be to God, our Gospel lesson also answers our prayer for God to show us his ways once again.

The religious leaders approach Jesus in the temple courts questioning him about his ways. “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?”

These things happened the previous day when Jesus entered the temple, drove out the buyers and sellers, overturned the tables and benches of the money-changers and dove-sellers, and declared they were not worshipping in God’s way but in their own way. “My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers.”

Jesus agrees to answer their questions if they will answer his. “John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?” Jesus asks them by what authority John baptized. Did he receive his ministry from humans or did it come from God?

The religious leaders tried to pigeonhole Jesus, but now they betray the truth of their intentions and show who they really are. They have no interest in the truth and ways of God. They concern themselves with their popularity among the people grasping after the fragile authority they hold. In the end, they answer with a pigeon-hearted, “We don’t know.”

Jesus does not answer their question directly, but in one way he already has. At the start of Jesus’ ministry, he was baptized by John. There, as he came up out of the water, God the Father spoke and the Holy Spirit descended both from heaven.

By asking them this question, Jesus points out that they already know where his authority comes from—that is, from God the Father; they just don’t want to believe it. And without realizing it, their discussion about the source of John’s baptism—which is the same source of Jesus’ authority—has touched on the true matter at hand: belief or faith.

It’s worth pausing here to say more about faith and belief. First, faith and belief are relational terms. They have objects. We place our faith *in* something. We believe *in* someone.

¹ Psalm 25:4

² Isaiah 55:8

We can also think about faith in relation to the scientific principle known as the conservation of mass. This principle states that mass is neither added too nor removed. Rather, it is simply rearranged. Likewise, faith does not disappear so to speak. Instead, we move our faith from one person or thing and place it in another.

This matters because the root sin is unbelief or lack of faith. But not just a blanket unbelief in anything; rather, the root sin is unbelief *in God*. Or in the language of the Small Catechism, we sin when we fail to fear, love, and trust in God above all things and instead, fear, love, and trust in something or someone else above all things.

Jesus continues with a parable about a father who has two sons. To the first, he said, “Son, go and work today in the vineyard.” The son answered, “I will not.” But later changed his mind and went. The father went to his second son and said the same thing. This son answered, “I will, sir.” But he did not go.

Jesus closes by asking, “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” Asked another way, “Which of the two did what his father desired?” Or, “which of the two did the father’s will?” With seemingly no deliberation they answer, “the first.”

There is a loose connection between this parable and the parable of the Prodigal Son. Like with that parable, the offense of the first son in this parable can’t be overstated. This is more than a mere slight. It is a highly punishable transgression. Both sons have sinned gravely, and the repentance of the first son does not erase or make up for his sin against his father.

So what’s the purpose of the parable? Jesus’ response drives it all home.

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus says, “tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.” The purpose of the parable is not to figure out which son you are, but to realize that you are neither. Without Jesus, we cannot rightly respond in thought, word, or deed to the will of our heavenly Father.

We see here that what Ezekiel says about getting a new heart is easier said than done. Sin persists in and blinds even the most religious and moral. The religious leaders accused Jesus’ ways, which are God’s ways, of being unjust as those in Ezekiel’s time did, but it is they who stand accused by Jesus of the root sin of unbelief.

In accusing them, Jesus tells us what God’s way is; that is, what his will is for us. Namely, that we believe, that is, that we have faith in Jesus, the one he sent, and that he did the Father’s will “by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross” for the forgiveness of our sins.³ He did this because, as Lord declares through Ezekiel, he takes “no pleasure in the death of anyone.”⁴

The way of righteousness, the way of the Lord John came to show, is that which John’s father, Zechariah prophesied at his birth. “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for

³ John 6:40; Philippians 2:8

⁴ Ezekiel 18:32

you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.”⁵ The way of the Lord is salvation by means of the forgiveness of our sins.

The way of righteousness, the way of the Lord, is that God does NOT remember your sins or your rebellious ways, but remembers you according to his steadfast love.⁶ When Scripture speaks of God remembering something, it is not a mere mental exercise. For God to remember is for God to act toward those he remembers. Just as significant is the converse: if for God to remember is for him to act, then, for God to not remember is for him not to act.

This plays out in the words of one of those crucified with Christ: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”⁷ He wasn’t asking for Jesus to reminisce or reflect on the time they shared being crucified together. No, like David’s prayer in our psalm for today, he asked Jesus not to act toward him according to his sin, but according to God’s steadfast love and goodness on display right in front of him. God remembered your sin once and for all, acting against it in Christ at his crucifixion. He forgave you and remembers your sin no more.

The way of righteousness, the way of Lord, is Jesus, “who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used for his own advantage.”⁸ Instead, he used his divinity for your advantage and benefit. He could have come to earth in wealth and power and hobnobbed with the elite, out of sight of the poor. He could have avoided touching lepers to heal them, eating with tax collectors to teach them, and associating with women of ill repute to redeem them. But he didn’t. Jesus gave up his advantage to be served by all, that he might serve all by his death on the cross.

The way of righteousness, the way of the Lord, is what Jesus has been pointing to in the Gospel lesson all along. It is not a way of self-made righteousness by the things you do. It is the way of the God who works *in you* to fulfill his good purpose.⁹ The God who worked faith in you through his water and word at your Baptism.

And this is what we celebrate and commemorate today: the work of God in the lives of Calvary’s confirmation students who affirm their baptism and the faith and forgiveness they received there. And our first communion students who join us in receiving the body and blood of Jesus given and shed for the forgiveness of their sins and for the strengthening of their faith.

Thanks be to Lord our God, that he is good; and because he is good he instructs sinners, that is, he instructs us, in his ways. **AMEN.**

⁵ Luke 1:76-77

⁶ Psalm 25:7

⁷ Luke 23:42

⁸ Philippians 2:11

⁹ Philippians 2:13