

In our series on the seven deadly sins, we have completed the first two cycles – those of Purgation and Illumination. Our aim in the Purgation cycle was to develop a greater awareness of the scope of our sins so that we would avoid committing them. In the Illumination cycle we sought to be enlightened about the virtues we should seek in place of the vices which we shun. This morning we begin the final cycle in our Trinity season quest for spiritual growth, the cycle of Union. We do not want to simply eschew one thing in favor of another. This may suffice for a season, but it is hard work. Without a larger goal, we will become discouraged and possibly give up in this quest. Therefore, we must ask the question, “Why should I pursue such virtues and purge away such vices from my life? What is it really all about?” The answer to this takes us away from our individual selves and turns our attention to the majesty and beauty of the One God in three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. We were created to be united to Him in loving fellowship, and this is why we pursue His goodness and learn to detest the wickedness in us with all that we have.

Our Roman Catholic brethren have the idea of purgatory, where after death, each soul suffers torments in time in order to be made fit for union with God. Their doctrine is that purgatory is necessary to purge away any remaining impurities in the soul. As a good English catholic, I am more and more convinced that *this life* is our purgatory. The struggles with sins which we face now, the trials and troubles of this life, the taste of sublime joys that we have in various moments separated by the hard work of most of our lives, these all are working together to make us to be fit partakers of that heavenly feast. Christ’s sacrifice, once and for all upon the cross, is sufficient for you, for me, for the whole world. He is our righteousness, and in this life, we are now learning to be what we have been already made in Jesus Christ. We are learning right now, and in all the coming days with which we are blessed with life on this earth, about holiness and godliness and purity, all for the love of God and all for our eventual

union in eternal blessedness with the unimaginable love, the unfathomable beauty, of Our Creator.

This is what this series is about. It isn't about do this thing, oh... and don't do this other thing. It isn't about, "Oh, there goes Father Kent again, talking about sin." It is about being eternally bathed in the lovingkindness and divine goodness of God; becoming one with God, no longer separated and isolated from Him by sin, but experiencing true union because there is no longer anything in us which causes us shame. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we will be naked and unashamed. The Triune God will bring us into the beautiful perfection that He always intended for us. Nothing will hinder us from that intimacy for which we all long. This is our end, thanks be to God!

In the epistle lesson today from the 4th chapter of the epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul exhorts us to continue in the difficult journey that we have begun. "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, for-bearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

First, we must again note like we did last week, that Ephesians is one of the prison epistles. St. Paul is not telling us to persevere while he lounges in luxury. He is writing this while under house arrest. He is a prisoner for the sake of Jesus, and He is enduring this difficulty with joy because he understands why it is he suffers. He understands that through all of these trials, he is becoming the person God means him to be. He is becoming fitted for the eternal joy that awaits all of those who, come what may, remain faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ unto the end.

So this is one of the goals of St. Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians. He is encouraging them to faithfully endure their sufferings as well. Keep your eyes focused upon the prize. Do not let the troubles of this world derail the glory that is to be had in eternity. He is beseeching them to keep the faith. "Walk worthy of the calling wherewith ye are called. Embrace humility. Do not be impatient when you suffer. Bear with each others' failure and quirks. You are all members of the family of God. You are united to each other in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, be faithful for each others' sakes." Let us not miss that fact that St. Paul's plea to them is meant for all Christians, not just the Ephesians. It is meant for us as well. Therefore, let us also persist in faith, love, and hope for the sake of Christ.

The Apostle then points to the unity that is to be found in God. All things are united in Jesus who is given to us as the image of the eternal God. God is one of us because Jesus, God Incarnate, is one of us. Although we were created in His Image, we image God imperfectly because of sin. Yet as we are baptized into the body of Christ, that faded image is reborn in us and is daily being renewed. Christ is the perfect image for which we strive. All things are united together in God because God is One and He is the Creator of all. "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." As believers in Jesus Christ, we are already temples of God for the Spirit of God dwells in us. We hopefully and expectantly look for the day when new life will be unhindered by any taint of sin, and we will fully know, and fully feel, fully receive, the presence of God with us.

Let us take particular note, this morning, that in St. Paul's admonishment to us, that he mentions somewhat in passing, "that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,

with all lowliness and meekness.” In other words, with humility. If you recall, we first touched on the sin of pride right at the beginning of this series. Then we posited faith as the virtue by which we combat pride for faith is a persistent clinging to the doctrines of the faith as revealed to us by the *Word* of God. Again, I use that in both senses, both the Word written, the Holy Scriptures, and also the Word incarnate, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We know God because He reveals Himself by the Word, and we cling to what we know by faith. By faith we understand who God is, and who we are. And we understand that we are not God, but by His grace, we are brought into the presence of God, we are brought into His very family. If we know these things, holding fast to them by faith, then we will be humble for it is all of God. On our own we stand condemned. Yet the love of God is revealed to us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Yet now turning to the Gospel, we see that the Pharisees had somehow missed this. They behave as if they had done God favors, as if our relationship with God was, in fact transactional. There was a pride within them which was threatened by Christ. Of course this is the case. When God enters the room, all of those pretenders who put themselves before God are confronted with the Truth. You claim to be righteous and holy? Your claims are revealed to be lies when the true Righteous One and Holy One shows up. The prideful recoil and strike, yet their blows must go astray. It is pure pretense and foolishness to rail at God.

Still, this is precisely what they did. They paraded an afflicted man in front of Jesus on the Sabbath. They were watching Him, trying to catch Him. What pride and insolence. They thought they knew how to entrap the Lord. What patience our Lord showed them. The Pharisees had reasoned that if Jesus healed this man on the Sabbath, then He would have

broken the fourth commandment. If Jesus did not heal, then He would have been calloused and unloving, not worthy to be revered by any.

Jesus, of course, knows exactly what is happening. He first condemns them for their contempt of other human beings. They were using the sufferings of this man. They showed not the least compassion for this man who, like all of us, are special creations of God, bearing His very image. Such pride stuns us. Then Christ confronts them with the fact that they would work on the Sabbath if their wealth depended upon it. They would not let one of their animals suffer on the Sabbath. They have more compassion for an animal than for another human being.

Jesus then patiently continues by telling the parable of attendees to a wedding feast. “When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest seat; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; and he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest place; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee.”

Being prideful, these Pharisees wish to sit near the wedding party and so scramble and grasp to get to the best seats before any others. This is the image that Christ paints for us of these men who considered themselves to be godly, but then sought for the honor and praise of men instead of God. These are the same men who John the Baptist called whitewashed sepulchers – dignified and even beautiful on the outside, but filled only with death and corruption on the inside.

This is the warning for us today. Do we love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength? Do we love our neighbor as ourselves? Or do we have no time for God? Are we unwilling to be troubled by our neighbor? Do we gladly let others have the best seats or do we scrap and scramble to make sure we get our fair share or even more of the share? Always looking for the angle to get the best of others?

Humility has confidence in God. All things are in His hand. He is the master of the feast. Will we wait upon Him and His timing to lift us up. Would we rather fight to get our own way? Or do we just do our own thing without giving God the time of day? Would we rather hear God say, "Give this other man place?" or "Friend, come up higher." We see here a clear distinction drawn between pride and humility. Have faith in God. He will lift up the humble and put down the prideful. He will raise you up into His very presence to enjoy the best seat at that great wedding feast to come when we who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth celebrate the final union of redeemed humanity to God.

Friend, come up higher. God grant us to know and understand deeply in our souls that all good things come from Him. And now let us prepare to have a foretaste of that great feast to come. By Christ's divine love for us, let us receive Him as given to us in this blessed sacrament. And may we lovingly and ever and always give ourselves to Him.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.