

The collect this morning reads, "Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that we, who for our evil deeds do worthily deserve to be punished, by the comfort of thy grace may mercifully be relieved."

We have here, encapsulated for us, the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. In the ancient church, this was summarized as, "Jesus is Lord!" which was a brazen confrontation to the civil religion of the day which instead claimed, "Caesar is Lord!" For us, we don't deify our political leaders, but this does not mean that we don't have our own unique form of idolatry. Instead of proclaiming, "Jesus is Lord," we naturally believe, "I am Lord." Now, we know it is a little gauche to admit this predisposition to others. We don't go around blowing trumpets announcing this to the world, but in our decisions and choices, this is how we implicitly live.

It is a huge challenge to get individuals in a post-Christian society to consider Jesus and to come to Him for salvation. Perhaps the biggest stumbling block which keeps individuals from coming to the Church, from bowing the knee to Christ, is that first clause of our collect. "We, who for our evil deeds do worthily deserve to be punished." People automatically are offended by this. "What do you mean, 'evil deeds'! I don't do anything that bad, at least not worse than that guy over there. So why should I be punished?" Our first impulse is always to justify ourselves. "I ain't that bad."

But if we approach this idea from a different direction, we begin to get closer to the heart of the matter. Suppose we instead ask the question, "Are you good enough for God?" Most people, if they consider this question seriously, will admit that they are not good enough. But yet we still have a problem conceptually communicating the gospel to them. We need to go a step further and ask them, "Do you care that you are not good enough for God?" To this, we undoubtedly will find that most people do not care that they fall short of the standards of godliness and righteousness. We are comfortable here in America. We typically enjoy our

lives since most of us have our basic needs met, and we have enough diversions to keep us occupied. There are enough fun things to do, that we don't see our need. We don't really long for salvation.

The core issue here is a lack of the fear of God. Since we live rather comfortably, we can't imagine the horror of spending eternity separated from God and from the love of God. I can't say exactly what hell means for those who are judged by Christ and sent away from His presence. Many have speculated over the centuries of what hell could be. Some of their descriptions are hellish indeed and make us shudder in the thought such eternal torment. I don't know if these are accurate at all. I do know that hell is nowhere described in the Bible as tolerable. Whatever it is, is likely worse than we imagine, and we should long to avoid such a fate with all that we have. We need to be concerned with pleasing God and with understanding what that entails, and then we should live in such a way that we would pass from condemnation to life. We must fear God – and by this I don't mean just have a pious respect for God. I mean that we should take Matthew 10:28 seriously. “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (in Gehenna).”

We need to take the collect's first clause seriously. We, all of us, do, for our evil deeds, worthily deserve to be punished. Like we mentioned earlier, we all surely have done enough wickedness in our lives to condemn ourselves. But our problem is even deeper. We human beings are defective. We were created for eternal life, but since the sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden, we have been subject to death, both physical and spiritual. We are born isolated and separated from God, and this is known as original sin. We have inherited the fallenness of Adam.

Now again, most people take umbrage at this. “What do you mean that I am not good

enough even if I had done nothing wrong!” Well, first of all, you have done things wrong so this is somewhat a moot point. But secondly, just look around at the world. It is a mess. Every person has some image in their minds of how the world should be, and every person knows that what we got, ain’t it! We all know that the world and all of us people in the world, are broken at a very deep level.

It is like we are all stuck in the bottom of a deep pit. Most people, as mentioned above, are busy convincing themselves that it is not so bad in the pit. We may try to tell them that the floor of the pit is going to collapse one day, but that just seems like some far off thing that doesn’t really impact them now. They will worry about that later.

Some people, however, sense that they are in the pit and want to get out. The question then becomes how do they? Well, most have some ideas of how to do this. There are a lot of instructions that have to be followed, but one little mistake will send them back to the bottom of the pit. Add to that, that no one has ever made it out of the pit. No one has even come close. Once, there was a man who came down into the pit from outside, who knew the way back out again, and who is now outside reaching down to help any who would grab hold of His arm. This is the only way out. We have to grab hold of Jesus.

Those who are trying to make it out of the pit on their own are like the people who St. Paul says are living according to the covenant of the law established at Mt. Sinai and represented by Hagar from the story in Genesis. Hagar was a bondwoman – she served Sarah, the wife of Abraham. As you may recall, Hagar had a son, Ishmael, by Abraham in an attempt to fulfill God’s promise. This is man’s attempt to make things happen on our own which results in failure and death. This is our attempt to fix our problems, to get out of the pit, by following the law, living a perfect life. That which is imperfect cannot make itself perfect.

Paul makes the argument elsewhere, that the law was never given as a way for man to save Himself. The covenantal promise was made to Abraham first based on Abraham's faith. Salvation, therefore, is, and always has been, and always will be, by faith. The Mosaic law was given to show us, to teach us, first, of the holiness and righteousness of God, and second, of how far short we come of God's righteousness. It was given to drive us to Christ.

God fulfilled His promise through Sarah, Abraham's wife, not through Hagar. When Sarah turned 90, she miraculously bore Isaac, and through him the covenant would continue in the generations to come. Those who live by the promise, obey the law, not out of duty, but out of love rooted in faith.

After he fathered both Ishmael and Isaac, Abraham was given a chance to again prove his faith, to prove that he understood that both his life and the continuation of the covenantal promise were completely dependent upon the grace of God. He was tested by God to offer the child of the promise, Isaac, as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah. And Abraham did what he was asked. Having seen Abraham's faith, God stopped him. Isaac was spared. Tradition holds that Mount Moriah was the same spot as Mt. Calvary, where God did not spare His own Son, but allowed Jesus to be the sacrifice for the sins of the world. God provided the sacrifice, the Son of Abraham, the Son of God.

Sarah thus is represented by Jerusalem, where the Lamb of God took away the sins of the world. More than the earthly city of Jerusalem where the historic temple was, the heavenly Jerusalem is the place where God eternally dwells with man. Wherever the faithful are, there the Holy City is, there the Spirit of God is, there life and health and peace and abundance is. There is the Church where we are continually fed by the Lamb Himself, who perpetually gives Himself to us, who lifts us up out of the pit, and raises us into the heavenly city itself. This is what those who grasp on to Jesus learn. His yoke is easy and His burden is light.

We contrast this with Hagar who was not free. She was the servant of the Sarah. She was compelled to bear Ishmael. And like Hagar, those who live under the law, given on Mt. Sinai, are not free. In the psalm today, we were reminded of the clouds and lightning and earthquakes that enclosed the summit of Mt. Sinai evoking terror in the Hebrews camped around its base.

8 The earth trembled and quaked, * the very foundations also of the hills shook, and were removed, because he was wroth.

9 There went a smoke out in his presence, * and a consuming fire out of his mouth, so that coals were kindled at it.

10 He bowed the heavens also, and came down, * and it was dark under his feet.

11 He rode upon the Cherubim, and did fly; * he came flying upon the wings of the wind.

12 He made darkness his secret place, * his pavilion round about him with dark water, and thick clouds to cover him.

13 At the brightness of his presence his clouds removed; * hailstones and coals of fire.

14 The Lord also thundered out of heaven, and the Highest gave his thunder; * hailstones and coals of fire.

There is no lack of fear of the Lord here. The Hebrews gathered around the foot of the mountain were warned not to approach the mountain, but I suspect they needed not this warning. God revealed to them a sense of His power and majesty.

This fear compels obedience, but such obedience is always marked by human imperfection; on its own without the grace of God, it falls short of His perfect standard. Those who think that they can approach God through their own merits earned through such imperfect

obedience do not understand the holiness of God. They generally compare themselves to others in order to have self-assurance, but even in this they sin for they are being judgmental. Truly, there is no health in us. Lord have mercy upon us.

But this is the whole point. The Law brings us to the end of ourselves so that we have no choice but to plead the mercy of Christ. And in receiving His mercy, we begin to understand the love of Christ. His love heals us, His love feeds us, and His love casts out fear, replacing it with awe and reverence and thanksgiving, allowing us to truly begin to extend His love to others.

May we this morning be reminded of the evil thoughts and desires from which we were freed and against which we still fight. May we also more fully embrace our salvation as heirs of the promise and citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. May our faith be strengthened so that we would indeed be comforted more and more by the mercy and grace of Christ. And God grant that as the multitudes followed Jesus where ever He went, that the healing life of Christ would also truly shine through us to the world, drawing all men to Him.

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