

7th Epiphany
February 19/20, 2022

Where is your hope? Is it in the world resuming what you have thought of as ‘normal’? Do you desire to live out your days to old age healthy and able to do what life brings your way? These are all good things, but if your hope is simply in a good life here, this may be a temptation to take your eye off of the prize.

The joy of life is a gift God has given to all. We want to live, but death looms its ugly head in our face. There have been and are many scoffers in this age. One the one hand, they want to live, but on the other, they mock anything that seems to them religious. “You believe what you want, but only a fool can believe such things as Christ and the resurrection.” I guess then, by the estimation of those in the world who say such things, I am a fool. Although I have been a fool for much lesser things, I am certainly a fool for Christ. It does not matter what the world says. They are constantly rehashing the same old tried and untrue things. Wrap up a pig in fine clothes and it is still a pig. The world denies the Creator of all things. The world wants eternal life, but it wants it on its own terms. The world is crazy, for it will be as the Author of life determines.

Some cannot fathom why God has done what He has done. Why did God allow the world to go wrong? Well, let me ask you, “Are you able to do in any moment what you chose to do?” Of course you are. Constrained perhaps by the boundaries that are around you, but then, many cast of those constraints off each day and go ahead and cross the boundary, doing what they do. The Lord calls this sin. Why then did God grant this freedom? Again, if we did not have this freedom, we would be mere machines, preprogrammed to do what we are supposed to do. It is as simple as the truth you know that You are able to make choices each day. This is the ability God grants which allows us to sin also gives us the ability to learn how to love. God is love and He desires those who will enter into His love, loving Him as He loves each one of us. Our Lord has not created some kind of meritorious scheme in which we can gain something if we just chose to do what is right. Doing what is right is the right thing to do. It comes as a result of right living. To not do what is right is to enter into defiance and pretend that you are exempt from the created order of things. It is a nefarious loop. It is this loop which Christ came to overcome for our sake. That is, for the sake of all who would chose the path of subjecting their wills to the One who will conform them to the image of Christ.

Christ was raised from the dead and because He was raised from the dead, those who are able to see understand that this once dead man now living has opened a new way of life. It is that life into which we are invited. The first Adam was a living being, as are you and I. The last Adam became a life giving spirit. Here is a reality that often eludes us. We are born physical, but are reborn in the Holy Spirit as more than just a physical being. The first man is from the dust. The last man is from heaven. We are to be united with Christ!

Love your enemies, pray for those who abuse you, turn the other cheek, be generous, do not seek retribution, do unto others as you would have them do to you. Have you ever wondered how Jesus could ask us to do something that is seemingly so impossible? Sure, we do these things for our family and friends, but Jesus tells us that we are to do this for all others, strangers included.

We see things through the eyes of our own prejudice. There are those whom we will help and those whom we will not help. But why? Why do we allow grace for some and not for others. Perhaps, we may tell our selves that some deserve either the good we will give, or the bad they receive. But if we go down that trail, it is not long before we discover that we wind up at a dead end, for we are these very people we would avoid if we think in terms of perfection.

What Jesus is instructing us to do is nothing less than to undergo a complete transformation of our character. If we are to become like Jesus, what does this mean? It means that what we call our natural tendencies need to be changed. After all, we say that we are born in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. This may give us a place to start. We see the contrast of what Jesus tells us is the behavior, attitude, relationship that we are to have with our neighbor and compare it with the attitude and behavior we really have. We see where some of the problem lies. What we will be and what we are, are two different things.

Let's get it straight, though. It is not that we must do these things to be acceptable to the Lord. It is that when we come to Him, this is what He will do in us. He will make each of us this kind of person if we hand ourselves over to Him. In our modern look-for-the-quick-fix culture, we may forget that the journey of salvation is one which will prepare us to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. In order to dwell there, we need to live by the house rules. Unlike this age where there always seem to be those who are looking for a way around things, there will be no exceptions in heaven to live by house rules. So how do we get from where we are to where we need to be if we are going to be ready to dwell with the Lord forever? It is here that we meet the point of beginning to understand this thing we call grace.

Grace is what we need. It is that God-given ability to walk through every situation, seeking what the Lord intends, seeing what we need to see, and being enabled to move farther along the journey of becoming like Christ.

Take for instance the call for us to be merciful as we have received mercy. Mercy is not getting what you deserve. A free pass, so to speak, some might think. But the purpose of mercy is not to get away with anything, but an opportunity to learn and grow from our mistakes. Allow others the same leeway you've received for the sake of their eternal soul. Of course we have all fallen short, not done things the way they ought to be done, etc., but that's where forgiveness comes in. Receiving forgiveness is also receiving mercy. Jesus taught us in the Lord's prayer to forgive as we have been forgiven. I sometimes wish I could make this easier, but I am not the one giving these directions. We receive grace *and* mercy, so grace cannot be the same thing as mercy. To be forgiven is to be given the opportunity to do things the way they need to be done, but doing things the way the Lord would have us do them is often something quite different from how we actually do them. There is something else that is needed to enable us to move beyond our inability and this is where grace comes in. Grace provides us a working of the Holy Spirit in us to enable us to move beyond our zone of familiarity in order to do the very things that Jesus is talking about, shifting from how they are done to how they need to be done.

My sinful nature wants to return hate for hate. The Holy Spirit reminds me that I am to love my neighbor, who in the case of this example, is hating me. Truth be told, in moments like these, I do not know what to do. What then? Turn to the Lord and the Holy Spirit will guide you step by step to do whatever is needed according to His guidance. I find somebody doing something I truly believe is wrong. What do I do. I want to confront them and tell them, but if I walk in grace, I may well receive a direction that may or may not make sense to me. The one who is sinning may well be one of the redeemed of the Lord and undergoing a trial by fire. The Lord would know this, but I would not. It may be as simple as a word of forgiveness is needed and that is a word I can speak. It may be that the Lord would have me say nothing at all. We are reminded that whenever the Lord forgave sins, He acted as though He was the party chiefly offended. That is because every sin is chiefly against the Lord. He who created You and everyone else loves us equally. You are forgiven. You are under the grace of Christ. You have the promise of His redemption. Now the hard work in this age begins. Walk in order to become like Christ. Amen.