Grace and peace to you in Jesus Christ

*So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.*

Ephesians 4:17-19

This is a powerful admonition that Paul is giving to the Christian church; and this is even to a church that was doing fairly well at the time Paul wrote this letter. This alone tells us that no matter how well we or our church is doing, we must never let down our guard. Satan is relentless and will never stop tempting us until he is cast into the lake of fire.

The prominent message here is that we are to be different. We do not act or even think like the world does. We are set apart; we are called to be holy; we are God’s people in Jesus Christ and so, by our new nature, we are different.

The thing we must deal with is that our flesh still wants to behave as the world; but we must see to it that our newly born spirit is who guides us. To help motivate us, Paul point-blank tells us what living like the world involves.

Worldly thinking is futile, there is no ultimate understanding in it; we exist for a while and then we are gone. There is no real point to life. And because of that ignorance, they cannot receive the temporal or eternal life God offers. Their hearts are hard and they become slaves to sin. This is a sorry way to live, but it is the way of most.

You are a Christian. Live your life like one who follows Christ.

In Christ’s love

John

3-5-23

Esther 2:5-17

As I’m sure you all know, tomorrow evening begins the Jewish feast of Purim. Anyway, the account given in the book of Esther is where the feast of Purim began. The enemy of the Jews in this book, Haman, cast lots to see when to begin his campaign to wipe out all the Jewish people. The Persian word for the lot was the Pur. Hence the name Purim.

I do think we know the basic story of Esther. She was a Jewish orphan in Persia who was raised by her cousin Mordecai. Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed Jerusalem and deported most of the Israelites to Babylon. Seventy years later, Babylon was taken over by the Medo-Persian armies, and the Persian king Cyrus allowed the people of Israel to return home.

Many of the Jews chose to stay in the vicinity of Babylon instead of returning to Judea; among them were Esther and Mordecai. Haman was a self-promoting man who managed to get himself into the position of second in command; second only to king Ahasuerus. Haman became angry with Mordecai and devised a plan to wipe out the entire Jewish population. Throughout the account, there are twists and turns, cliff-hangers and comedies, and finally the Jewish nation is rescued from Haman’s plot.

One of the amazing things about the book of Esther is that God is never mentioned. He is never mentioned by His name Yahweh or by any other designation; the word God doesn’t occur. Prayer is never mentioned. Fasting is the only thing along these lines that takes place in the story, but even then, it is simply a fast, not specifically a fast to the Lord.

The thing is that the silence regarding God in this book makes Him even more prominent. The way everything keeps happening and the way things work out is too much to be coincidence. Either the book of Esther is a fantastic story by someone with quite the imagination; or God is all through it working out His providence, protecting His chosen people, and making sure that the seed of the woman comes as promised through Abraham.

The book of Esther shows us in a short account, what has been taking place throughout history. Two things are going on at the same time that is beyond our human minds to reconcile: the providence of God and the free will of people.

God knows how He wants things to turn out and He has known since before the beginning of time. He intervenes in the world, sometimes by miracle, but usually by working through His creation, be it natural, angelic, or human. Back in Genesis 2, God rested; but He only rested from creating, not from sustaining all of His creation and His work of redemption. As Jesus said in John 5:17, “*My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.*” We know that Jesus continues to intercede for us from His throne in heaven.

On the other hand is the free will of people. And to make things worse, our free will is tainted by sin. The question becomes ‘How can God work things out when people are making their own decisions about things?’ Well, that is why He is God and we are not. Perhaps not the most satisfying answer, but we don’t always get to know what God is about. As we read in Isaiah 55:8-9, “*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.*” The Bible calls us to trust God, and that is what we are to do.

The verses we are looking at today are ones that cause some consternation in the Christian community. It raises questions about the morality of Esther and Mordecai. It is not my intent to solve these issues during this sermon; folks have been discussing them for centuries. I would like to consider the people and what God is able to do with them.

The things that happen in this account are messy and we tend to like things in the Bible to be pure and holy. Sometimes we try to justify things that are wrong and when we do so, it just makes things worse. The Bible tells things as they are and when dealing with sinful humanity, things get messy. Yet God is able to work things out in accordance with His plan; and so, He is glorified. That should be our main concern, that God be glorified.

Part of the problem is that the heroine of the story is part of what can only be described as a contest. It is a contest to see which girl most pleases a pagan king. After a year of beauty treatments, she spends a night with the king, and is then shuffled off into a harem, ever after to be only called at the king’s whim. While it is true that Esther didn’t volunteer for this, she did go along with it. Apparently Mordecai did also.

We like stories such as we read in Daniel, where he and his three friends defied the king and were willing to be thrown to the lions or into a fiery furnace. Here Esther submitted to sleeping with a pagan man to whom she wasn’t married. Daniel and his companions wouldn’t defile themselves by eating the food given to them, whereas Esther ate the food provided. She eventually became queen by marrying Ahasuerus.

I don’t bring these things up to condemn Esther. She later showed great courage by coming into the king’s presence when doing so could have gotten her killed. In fact, that was likely to happen. But she did it anyway in order to try to save her people. She showed great skill and cunning in speaking to the king and then revealing the plan of Haman to wipe out her people. Esther was greatly used by God.

And that is the point. God can and does use imperfect sinful people to accomplish His plan; people just like us. God has work for each of you to do, don’t let past mistakes or failings keep you from living your life for Jesus. Jesus died to save you from your mistakes, to bring complete forgiveness for your sins, and His work is perfect. Because of this we are free to forget what is behind and strive toward the goal of living for Christ.

Esther may have had some moral failings, but God had gifted her with physical beauty, a pleasant demeaner, intelligence, and courage. God worked through her to, once again, save His people Israel from destruction. Mordecai likely caused the whole problem of Haman wanting to wipe out the Jews. He refused to show respect to Haman. Yet God had gifted Mordecai with wisdom and integrity. That wisdom was used in advising Esther and later in governing the kingdom.

The Bible is full of examples of fallible mankind being used by the Almighty. King David is certainly an example of one who was greatly used by God, yet committed adultery, murder, and was sometimes prideful. But God used him for the good of the people and as a forerunner of the Messiah.

Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and to the border of the Promised Land. He was the mediator between God and the people; a foreshadow of Christ. But because of his disobedience, he wasn’t allowed to enter the Promised Land. He made mistakes, yet he was still the man who spoke with God face to face.

Consider the miserable example of Lot: A man who consented to live among the Sodomites, argued with the angels who were trying to rescue him, offered his own daughters to be ravished by a hostile crowd, and ended up impregnating them while he was drunk. It’s hard to conceive of someone lower on the scale of sin, but God’s word tells us that Lot was righteous because the behavior of the people among whom he lived tortured his soul. (2 Peter 2:7) He longed for the righteousness of God.

Think about Mary, the mother of Jesus. In spite of all she had seen and heard, she didn’t fully comprehend who her Son was. At one point she attempted to take Him home to restrain Him. Her understanding wasn’t complete until Pentecost. Yet she was highly favored and blessed by God. He had work for her to do and she did it. And she, like all the others mentioned here, received salvation through Jesus Christ.

There are modern examples too. There is John Newton. He was a slave trader. He went to the African coast and raided villages, putting the people on ships and selling them into slavery. He came to faith in Christ and wrote the song “Amazing Grace”. Corrie Ten Boom recounts meeting with one of the Nazi guards of the Jewish concentration camp where she had been a prisoner. He had come to Christ in repentance of all he had done. And in that meeting, Corrie learned to forgive as Christ wants us to.

And so it is with each of us. We are nothing but sinners who have been saved by grace when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. It helps us to understand that we bring nothing to God. But He has things for us to do, and He has equipped us for these works with spiritual gifts. It ought to be our desire to use these gifts in a way pleasing to God simply because He loves us; and that desire is given to us by the Holy Spirit.

Again, I want to encourage you. All of us have done things we really wish we hadn’t done. All of us have failed; at times, miserably, to live as God wants us to live. As we are told in Romans 3:23, “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*”.

And here is the thing we have to watch out for: Satan would love to remind you of all those failures and keep you paralyzed so that you won’t complete the work God has for you. Once you accept Jesus as your Saviour, satan can’t bring your soul into hell; so he will try to make you ineffective for the Kingdom of God. He will bring up things from the past and throw them in your face and tell you that you can’t be acceptable to God after what you’ve done. But remember that satan is a liar from the beginning and the father of lies.

Know and understand what the Bible tells us. Jesus’ work on the cross was perfect. He saves us. He doesn’t get us close; He doesn’t get us to within a couple more steps; He didn’t take away most of our sins: As Paul continues in Romans 3:24, we are “*justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.*”

That sentence is packed. We are justified, that is, we are declared by God to be “not guilty”. Our guilt is removed. It is a gift; we don’t earn our salvation. It is by God’s grace; it is a favor He bestows on us that we don’t deserve. We are redeemed; we owed a debt that we couldn’t pay and Jesus paid it for us. Jesus paid that debt publicly on the cross out in the open where everyone could see and Jesus’ shameful death is still on display in the Gospel. His suffering and death is the propitiation, the appeasement of God’s wrath on our behalf. That appeasement comes at the expense of His blood; His very life poured out for us.

And it all comes to us through faith; and that faith must be in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus, believing in Him as Saviour, is the only condition for us to receive this free gift from God; and even that faith is given by the Holy Spirit.

If you have called upon Jesus to be your Saviour, your sins are forgiven: past, present, and future. That doesn’t mean you can sin willy-nilly; we avoid sin because we recognize what He has done for us and we want to be pleasing to Him. Obedience to His commands is how we show our love for Him.

When we do fail and sin, the apostle John tells us what to do: *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*. (1 John 1:9) Our salvation in Christ is believing in Him. Along with that belief comes the recognition of our sinfulness. When we confess that we need Christ because of our sinfulness, we are forgiven all. Then, as we live our Christian life and experience failure, our relationship with Jesus is damaged. We then turn to Him in repentance and our fellowship is restored. Although we are clean, sometimes we need our feet washed.

Learn from past sins and mistakes so you can avoid them in the future and help other Christians in their struggles. But then, know that they are gone. God has cast our sins into the sea of forgetfulness. Don’t let satan bring them up and keep you from the work that God has for you. There is great liberty in Christ; liberty from past failures, liberty to be pleasing to the Lord.

In the book of Esther, God seems to be absent. And it often seems that way in the world today. It seems like God has just let everything go. But we can see in the book of Esther that God is working in the background by His providence; and He is working through His people, like Esther and Mordecai.

God is still working today, in the background by His providence. And He is working through His people. He is working through you.

Prayer

Sometimes, Lord, Your word can be difficult to understand. Sometimes, things just don’t seem to be right. But we can know that Your word is true and that You are good and that You are good all the time. So we ask for the guidance of Your Holy Spirit so that we may understand the Bible and glean from it what You have for us. We know that it reveals Your glory and teaches us how we can be pleasing to You.

Thank You for Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. We know and confess that He is the one and only way to You; He is the only means of salvation. We proclaim that He has paid the debt that we can’t pay and that He has completely satisfied Your just wrath for each of us who believe in Him.

Blessed Lord, help us now, that the full impact of what Jesus has done would be upon us. We need to understand that we are forgiven, that we are guiltless, that we have been covered with His righteousness; and that we owe all this to Him. Give us this understanding so that we may withstand the attacks of satan, and go forth in Your strength, to serve You and build Your Kingdom.

It is in Jesus’ name we pray

Amen