

Ps 1:1,2,3
Hy 1A
Ps 130:1,2,3,4
Ps 19:4,5
Ps 25:2; Hy 37:3,4
Romans 7:7-25
Romans 8:1-17
Lord's Day 44.114,115

Yarrow, June 21, 2009

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Lord's Day before us this afternoon asks a question about the need for strict preaching of the Ten Commandments. Its answer confronts us with two tasks. Strict preaching of the law is needed, says our Lord's Day, "so that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature, and therefore seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ." "Aware of our sinful nature:" yet some of us act as if sin is really not a big deal. One hears foul language in our midst, for example, despite God's explicit condemnation of it – and we justify it with saying, "That's how we talk today." Young men try to make a bridegroom drunk at a stag though God condemns drunkenness – and we say, "But we're just having fun." Smokers keep on smoking though God says not to kill and the cigarette package itself reminds us that smoking is not good for your health – and we say, "I have to; nerves, you know." Despite the explanations we offer, such conduct remains sin in the eyes of God, and yet we live with it. In other words, there's something casual, something relaxed about our obedience to God. To do justice to our Lord's Day, then, I shall need to make clear this afternoon how totally contradictory such tolerance of sin is with our Christian identity and confession.

Our Lord's Day adds that strict preaching of the law is necessary "so that, while praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, we may never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God's image." Some of us see sin within ourselves, and because of our inability to overcome our sinful habits we end up doubting our salvation and becoming despondent on account of our weaknesses. Then we get a sermon that touches on the strict preaching of the law and the need to obey God's commandments perfectly, and we become even more disheartened, even totally discouraged. For if we have the Spirit, we should do better, shouldn't we? Here I need to encourage and to direct your attention to the work of Jesus Christ accomplished for your redemption.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THE STRICT PREACHING OF GOD'S LAW DRIVES THE HUMBLE CHRISTIAN BACK TO THE FINISHED WORK OF JESUS CHRIST.

1. How much God hates sin,
2. How mighty the renewing work of the Spirit is.

1. How much God hates sin.

God is in no way casual or slap-happy about sin. Even before sin entered the world God made clear to Adam His radical hatred of sin, for He announced the death penalty on sin (Genesis 2:17; cf Romans 6:23). Yet to appreciate how strict God is on obedience to His commands, we do well to notice just what kind of sin would generate the death penalty. It turns out that it has to do with nothing more than eating fruit from a forbidden tree! We puzzle: would taking an apple from a neighbour's tree warrant a death sentence?? Isn't that over the top? Indeed, congregation, it does sound that way to our human ears. Yet precisely this point makes clear how totally intolerant God is of any sin. For He is *God*, and not a man; He is *God*, holy, so different from us that we can never measure Him by human standards. Being the creatures we are, we shall need to *accept* His standards without challenging the correctness of those standards in any way; rather, precisely because He is God and we but people, we shall need to embrace that His standard is correct while ours is not. So there is an important lesson to learn from the fact that God drove man out of His presence, out of the Garden, out of communion with Him (Genesis 3:24) *after mankind ate just one fruit from the forbidden tree*. God is infinitely intolerant of any sin.

Then it's true that this same God adopted a sinful nation to be His people, delivered them from Egypt and established with them His covenant of grace at Mt Sinai. He even told them to build a tabernacle where He could live in the midst of this sinful people – and so we conclude that this God tolerates sin after all (as long as you don't do anything really wicked...). But notice, brothers and sisters, that God built *distance between Himself and sinners* in this tabernacle, for a curtain had to separate the Holy of Holies in the back of the tabernacle from the people outside. More, God had an altar built between Himself and the people where the blood of innocent animals had to flow continuously. The tabernacle where this God-who-is-intolerant-of-sin lived with His people had to be a messy and bloody and smelly place on account of all the dead animals and the bloodshed God wanted there, because the people had to understand how totally intolerant their God was of sin. Then yes, there's gospel, abundant gospel in that tabernacle, for the sinner is not killed but gets to live and even receive the assurance of God's favour through the blessing of the high priest. But the cost is so instructive! All that blood, all that death spelled out what the sinner deserved – and so drove home to the people of Israel how much God hated sin. So the psalmist taught the people of Israel to sing the words of Ps 130: "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?" (vs 3). This psalm is a Song of Ascents, to be understood as a song the people sang as they went up to the temple in Jerusalem. Well, the people knew about all the blood and all the dead animals of the temple, and they knew why there was so much death there; if God would deal with *them* as they deserve, they could not stand in that temple at all but would perish under God's holy hand. God's law required strict obedience! And woe to the priest who failed to drive that point home to Israel!

Perhaps God's radical hatred of sin comes out most clearly in the agony Jesus Christ experienced on the cross. The Lord God loved this Son of His dearly, and said so both at His baptism as well as at His Transfiguration. But once the sins of God's people were loaded onto Jesus Christ, God in heaven poured out on His Son not His love but His judgment. Hellish darkness descended on the crucified Saviour, and at the end of three hours of that utter darkness He cried out His desperate anguish: "My God, My God, why

have You forsaken Me?!” What do you think: was He cast into this utter darkness because God had a bit of a dislike for our sin? Was the Son of God cast out of God’s favour and out of His presence because God had a preference for niceness and the sins piled onto Jesus were not ‘nice’? We know the answer. Calvary was the horror it was because the Lord God hates sin –our sin– with a holy passion.

But how is it then, beloved, that some of us would say it’s OK to fudge on sin? How is it that some of us feel free to spend an evening at a night club – and then on Sunday sit without further ado at the Lord’s Table? How is it that some of us think it’s OK to flip your lid and slap your children around – and don’t need to apologize to them when we do so? How is it that we think it’s OK to demand your wife’s body because you have an appetite, that it’s OK to speak of your husband in a belittling fashion in front of the children? Does such conduct not reveal that actually we think God doesn’t mind a bit of sin?

Perhaps you say: your sermon makes me uncomfortable and makes others uncomfortable too; instead of emphasising sin you ought to tell us of the work of Jesus Christ. Yes, I will certainly get to that. But tell me first this, brothers and sisters: why would you seek redemption in Jesus Christ if God’s assessment of you was pretty positive to begin with? Yet that’s exactly what you say when you fudge on sin! Face it, to consider sin an acceptable part of life is to say that the God of life is OK with your sin. There’s no reason to flee to Jesus Christ unless one is disgusted with sin. And the reason one’s to be disgusted with sin is because our Maker is disgusted with sin! The psalmist’s question in Ps 130 needs an answer: “If You, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?” And the answer needs to be very personal: “Me, Lord.” I confess that Your hatred of sin is so great that if You would deal with me as I deserve, I would perish. For I, Lord, am a sinner, and it’s the law that drives home that unflattering reality. That’s what Paul writes about in Romans 7: “I would not have known what sin was except through the law” (vs 7). But because the law is so insistent in its demands, Paul knows he *has* to flee to Jesus Christ to escape the just sentence of God. So He ends the chapter with his cry of despair: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (vs 24f). Amazing: it’s the strict preaching of the law that drives us to Christ!

For yes, with Him is the glorious gospel of redemption. Sin demands death, and so the tabernacle of the Old Testament was full of so blood. Christ through His sacrifice on the cross atoned for sin so that sinners need not die on account of their sins – and animals need not die on our behalf either anymore, and we need not wade through inches of blood anymore. The wages of our sin is *His* death, so that we are free of penalty. And in the process of paying for our sins Christ kept every one of God’s commandments perfectly for our benefit. It’s a delightfully rich, glorious gospel!

You say: this is the gospel I believe, I run to Jesus Christ for my redemption. Wonderful, and blessed are you to receive grace to find salvation in the only Saviour. That brings us to our second point: those who find salvation in Him refuse to tolerate any sin; instead, because of the renewing work of the Holy Spirit the redeemed in gratitude make it their business to hate sin, fight sin, flee from sin. That’s the other point I needed to outline for you this afternoon:

2. How mighty the renewing work of the Spirit is.

After Paul in Romans 7 fled to Jesus Christ for redemption from the just judgment of God, he outlined in chapter 8 what the consequence might be. He draws out the consequence in striking manner. He's emphatic: all those who benefit from the *blood* of Jesus Christ also benefit from the *Spirit* of Jesus Christ. So he can say in Romans 8:9b: "if any does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ." It's a thought we do well to meditate on: the persons who benefit from the blood of Christ necessarily also have the Spirit of Christ. To say it differently: those who receive forgiveness of sins through Christ's blood are also renewed through Jesus' Spirit.

Well now, what's it mean to "have the Spirit of Christ"? Paul had mentioned in vs 4 something about living "according to the sinful nature" versus living "according to the Spirit". He details the difference between these two in vs 5: "those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires." The reference is here to a lifestyle; those in whom the Spirit of Christ lives no longer act as those in whom the Spirit does not live.

Why that's so? That's so, congregation, because wherever the Spirit is *change happens*, radical change. When God first created the world "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (Genesis 1:2). The result was that when God called for light there was light, and when God called for dry land to appear it did so; such change is the work of the Spirit. Gideon was a chicken at heart, but when "the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon" he became a man of strength and determination (Judges 6:34ff). Such radical change characterises all the Holy Spirit touches, including those in whom He comes to live – and He lives in everyone who believes in Jesus Christ. Such persons no longer give themselves to the sins of their past, but develop a sense of the holiness of God – and therefore come to share ever more strongly His sense of revulsion against sin. People who used to bring forth the "acts of the sinful nature" (or "works of the flesh", as other translations have it) are so radically changed by the mighty work of the Holy Spirit that they now bring forth "the fruit of the Spirit". Fancy that: self-satisfying attitudes and conduct as "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like" give way to such self-denying conduct and activity as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:19ff). That, says, Paul is the effect of the Spirit's indwelling, and we recognize that those two lists are hostile to each other, are opposites, cannot co-exist within one person. That's why I say: those who flee to Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins cannot hide the fact that they seek and receive refuge in Him; to be washed by His blood manifests itself by the fruit of the Spirit. That's how mighty the renewing work of the Holy Spirit is!

But, beloved, then we're back to the concern of the first point: how is it, then, that in our midst we still give room to sin?! Why can we laugh when we hear that persons among us have given themselves to works of the flesh as drunkenness? Why can we think it's OK to play around outside of marriage (be it in your imagination with the pornography the computer brings you, be it in reality with, say, the secretary)? The renewing work of the Spirit makes such behaviour intolerable for the child of God, and therefore intolerable in the church of Jesus Christ. That is why Lord's Day 44.115 can answer the question about the strict preaching of the Ten Commandments not only

with reference to becoming more and more aware of our sinful nature, but also with reference to “striving to be renewed more and more after God’s image.” Given the radical effect of the Spirit’s work, the child of God has no delight in sin and so wants to fight it, *does* fight it. It’s the struggle of Paul himself in Romans 7; the man had no delight in the sin that clung to him, and he hated it (vs 15). And that’s the struggle, says the Scripture, which invariably and necessarily characterizes every person for whom Christ has died.

It’s true: in this life no one will reach the goal of perfection. Romans 7: even Paul himself couldn’t manage to stop himself from sinning. Vs 15: “what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” If Paul couldn’t quit sinning, what chance do we have?! That’s why we confess in our Lord's Day: “in this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of” the obedience God requires in the Ten Commandments (A 114). To err is human indeed.

But the fact that sin remains in us does not mean that the child of God can acquiesce to sin as if a bit of sin is OK. Paul’s sins bothered him; that’s why he says he “hates” his sin (vs 15), and describes himself as a “wretched man” (vs 24). That’s why in turn the Christian confesses in Lord's Day 44.114: “Nevertheless, with earnest purpose they do begin to live not only according to some but to all the commandments of God.” That’s the mighty effect of the Spirit’s work: the Christian is a warrior, and the primary enemy he fights is the one within, is the temptation to minimize the seriousness of sin and tolerate some transgression.

It’s striking formulation. The Lord's Day’s reference to “with earnest purpose” means there’s nothing half-hearted in the desire or commitment to fight sin; there’s instead hearty resolve, genuine effort, sweat and struggle – and so no tolerance for a relaxed approach. Again, note the reference to “*all* the commandments of God” in the closing words of A 114. The child of God does not pick and choose, as if obedience to commands about Sunday observance are more important than obedience to commands about smoking or excessive drinking. Rather, “those converted to God” are determined, in the strength of the Spirit, to resist anything God calls sin no matter whether it’s Friday night or Sunday morning or Wednesday afternoon. That’s the inevitable and necessary fight of the Christian.

That same radical emphasis comes out in A 115. There’s ongoing prayer for the grace of the Holy Spirit, and while one prays one accompanies the prayer with work. What sort of work? Says the Catechism: “we ... never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God’s image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection.” “Never stop striving”: there’s your sense of “earnest purpose” in one’s resolve to stay clear of anything that offends God. It’s a striving true for every day, and it’s a striving that lasts till one breathes one’s last. To image God well is the desire and the determination of all who appreciate what God has done for sinners in Jesus Christ. This struggle, we understand, is the flavour of what Paul has written in Romans 7 & 8.

Where does all this leave us? Over the years we have repeatedly heard the glorious gospel of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ blood – and it’s a gospel we want to hear on account of the encouragement and the comfort there is in this gospel for sinners as we are. And that is good; it’s a gospel we need to keep on hearing and keep on wanting to hear. We’ve also heard so often the strict and careful preaching of the law of God, and time again we’ve also sung of how ‘the law of God is whole and it

revives the soul.' The elders are busy in the congregation and observe how that indeed the work of the Holy Spirit is evident in our midst, for there is living faith that displays itself through works of obedience and the fruit of the Spirit. For such blessings we're thankful, and need to remain thankful.

But the elders notice also that in our midst is contentment with some sin, complacency that tolerates particular works of the flesh. We have but a small beginning of the obedience God requires, so true. But that "earnest purpose" in fighting sin, that earnest purpose in fighting *all* sin, that cry of Paul when he uttered his sorrowful lament "What a wretched man I am!" needs to grow stronger and louder in our midst. "Earnest purpose", "never stop striving": those phrases demand sweat, struggle, effort to deny my sinful self and force myself to grow in God's service. That's what we need to see more and more of in our midst. That's what gratitude for Christ's redeeming grace looks like, and that's what the strict preaching of the law encourages.

I began this sermon with saying that I needed to do two things. The first was to make clear that we cannot keep thinking that a bit of sin is OK, and the second is that those redeemed by Jesus' blood are so mightily and radically changed that they have no appetite left for sin. The conclusion of the two points is clear: no child of God is content with any sin in his life.

It's time to go home. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. You love the Lord God, and know your sins forgiven in Jesus' blood? The evidence comes out in the fact that you "never stop striving" to do God's will every moment of every day. In fact, with earnest purpose you are determined to tolerate no sin in your life at all, not even a little sin against the least commandment.

In a word: being a Christian *looks like something*.