

The Eighteenth Sunday after Holy Trinity
Matthew 22:34-46

What must you do to obtain holiness?

That's basically the question of the lawyer in today's Gospel is.

First, what is holiness?

Basically, holiness is when you are able to stand in front of a perfect, holy God and not be consumed by His holy fire. In this sense, holiness and righteousness are interchangeable. If you are perfectly holy or perfectly righteous, you may be in God's holy presence without dying. You know what the problem we have with this. We aren't even born holy. We're born unrighteous with no fear or love of God. We're born enemies of God. So, the question of how we obtain holiness is of utmost importance.

In his book, "The Quest for Holiness," Adolf Köberle describes three methods that man uses to attempt to become holy:

"The sanctification of conduct by the strengthening of the will; the sanctification of the emotions by a strenuous training of the soul; the sanctification of thought by a deepening of the understanding; moralism, mysticism, speculation, these are the three ladders on which men continually seek to climb up to God, with a persistent purpose that it seems nothing can check; a storming of Heaven that is just as pathetic in its unceasing efforts as in its final futility." (pg. 2)

In one not so simple paragraph, Köberle has described all the attempts by man to get to God. And God will not have it. Let's look at these three methods in turn. First, we must understand that these three methods are always intertwined. This is how Köberle puts it: "Moral energy always unites itself as readily with the cultivation of subjective mysticism, as with

the rule of autonomous reason.” (pg. 2) Everyone engages somewhat with all three methods, so it’s good to look at them individually.

First, is moralism. This is the method of the lawyer in our reading today. It’s an attempt to get close to God by keeping the commandments. It’s Aristotle’s admonition that you become righteous by practicing righteousness. It’s the Buddhist monk who attempts to get rid of all desire because they see that as the root of sin. It’s the American Christian’s attempt to put prayer back in the schools or the Ten Commandments on the courthouse lawn.

The lawyer really has no excuse for falling for moralism. Paul says in Romans that none are righteous. Paul got this not from direct revelation from God, but by the way we get revelation from God, His Word. Specifically, in this case, Psalm 14:

¹ The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”
They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds;
there is none who does good.

² The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man,
to see if there are any who understand,
who seek after God.

³ They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt;
there is none who does good,
not even one. (Ps 14:1-3)

Jesus shows in the sermon on the mount how true this is. We think we’re righteous by a basic adherence to the minimal requirements of the Ten Commandments. We think we’re righteous because we don’t go around raping, pillaging, and plundering. We lust, steal, and commit violence in our hearts and think God doesn’t notice. We have heard this over and over again as Lutherans and I wonder if we just let it go by without meditating on it. Even your thoughts and motives are sinful. Not just your actions.

Aristotle and the Buddha have some excuse. They aren't believers. They're just working on the natural law written on their hearts. Their system has fooled a lot of people. Look at how popular self-improvement stuff is. "According to Market Research, the self-improvement market was worth \$9.9 billion in 2016 and is estimated to grow to \$13.2 billion by 2022."¹ No matter how much you improve yourself in any area of life, you can do nothing about past sins. Aristotle and Buddha have nothing to offer to those who need redemption. And according to the Psalmist, that's all of us! Moralism just doesn't work.

Moralism doesn't work and neither does mysticism. Hinduism is probably the best example of mysticism you can find. Basically, you look inside yourself for access to God. Unfortunately, many Christians also look to mysticism. "Jesus Calling" written by Sarah Young is a horrendous book that will destroy your faith. It teaches you to look to the inside of yourself for the voice of Jesus instead of His Word. In her own words, Young says, "I knew that God communicated with me through the Bible, but I yearned for more. Increasingly, I wanted to hear what God had to say to me personally on a given day." (xii) This is what God says about the heart:

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9)

"The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of the heart was only evil continually." (Gen. 6:5)

Eliphaz, one of Job's friends asks: "What is man, that he can be pure? Or he who is born of a woman, that he can be righteous?" (Job 15:14)

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Ps. 51:5)

¹ <https://brandminds.live/the-self-improvement-industry-is-estimated-to-grow-to-13-2-billion-by-2022/>

In other words, it's a really, really bad idea to look inside yourself for the voice of Jesus! Luther put it this way:

“In issues relating to the spoken, outward Word, we must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or grace to no one except through or with the preceding outward Word. This protects us from enthusiasts.” (SA III.VIII.3) Mysticism doesn't work.

Moralism and mysticism don't work and neither does speculation. Instead of looking for God in morals or inside themselves, speculators look to inside knowledge. I think its fair to put Gnosticism in this bunch. Gnosticism has plagued the church since its foundation and continues to plague he church. It believes it has special knowledge and only with this knowledge can you be saved. The important thing is not God but knowledge. Another kind of speculation is the prosperity Gospel that is popular among charismatics, Pentecostals, and many mainline Christians. The idea is that your mindset affects what God will do for you and what kind of life you will have. Robert Schuller is a tamer version of this same thing. Self-image fits in here as well, but it's a little messier. We'll talk about that another time as I reflect on it more. Job sure didn't buy into this kind of Christianity. Neither did the apostles who were all martyred except for John. Speculation does not get you to God.

Moralism, mysticism, and speculation do not get you to God. You cannot get to God. He must come to you. This is the great discovery of Luther and the Reformation. You cannot get to God, but amazingly, He comes to you! The only way you can be made holy is through God's gift of forgiveness.

Jesus asks the Pharisees the same basic question He asks His apostles. He asks His apostles, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15) Matthew 22:41–45 (ESV) This is how He asks the Pharisees:

⁴¹ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, ⁴² saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” ⁴³ He said to them, “How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying,

⁴⁴ “ ‘The Lord said to My Lord,
“Sit at My right hand,
until I put Your enemies under Your feet” ’ ?

⁴⁵ If then David calls him Lord, how is He his son?”

The only way this works is if Jesus is fully God, that is, David’s Lord, and fully Man, that is, David’s Son. But if that’s the case, then the Pharisees have to give up their house of cards. They must submit to Jesus. History shows they couldn’t and wouldn’t do this. There are and always will be men and women that insist on their own way instead of Jesus’ way. Jesus says, “I AM the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” (Jn. 14:6)

Jesus’ way is the way of Baptism. This is how Ezekiel describes baptism:

²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezekiel 36:25–27)

In Holy Baptism you are washed clean and given God’s Holy Spirit. This is how you are made holy. And we don’t choose to be baptized, but God chooses us in baptism. Here’s how Ephesians puts it:

⁴ [God] chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in

the Beloved... ¹³ In [Jesus] you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:4-6; 13-14)

You were sealed with the Holy Spirit when you were baptized!

Absolution, especially Private Confession & Absolution, is a wonderful gift of God and does nothing else than return you to your baptismal graces. It's as if you are washed anew with your baptismal water and word.

And in Absolution Jesus comes to you. He obviously comes to you in His Supper. And this is the key to holiness. Jesus comes to you. And you find Him where He promises to come.

He doesn't promise to be in you heart. He doesn't promise to be in your emotions. He doesn't promise to be in your mind. He comes to you from the outside.

He promises you that He comes to you in Baptism, Absolution, Preaching, and the Lord's Supper. Here is the only place He is found. Abandon any ladder you've created to reach up to God and receive Him where He promises to be. And you will be holy.

And when you are made holy by Jesus' Word and Sacraments, then you are able to live a life of honor, significance and service. In other words, a life worth living. These too are a gift of God.

"To Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen." (Jude 24-25)