

Religion—or Faith?

Proper 16 Track 2

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Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. AMEN.

Isaiah 58:9b-14 (NRSV)

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, ¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. ¹¹ The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. ¹² Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. ¹³ If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; ¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Hebrews 12:18-29 (NRSV)

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice

whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.²⁰ (For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.’²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’)²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.²⁵ See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.’²⁷ This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe;²⁹ for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Luke 13:10-17 (NRSV)

Now [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.’¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, ‘You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?’¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?’¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Two weeks ago I pointed out that faith is trusting in our trustworthy God. I said that what God wants from us is biblical, Christian faith instead of religion. Religion is doing things in the hope that God or some god will be pleased

with you and accept you. This morning I'd like to elaborate on Christian faith and see where the Word of God clearly distinguishes between faith and religion.

Our reading from Isaiah might give you the idea that what God is looking for is religion. It seems to say he's looking for us to do certain things to gain his favor. For example, God says, **"if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday."** Sure sounds like a *quid pro quo*, doesn't it? **"Good things (the *quid*) will happen if you do these things (the *quid*)."** **"This—for that."**

But our reading starts at the second part of verse 9. In the section of the prophecy just before this, the Lord is responding to his people's complaint in verse 3. They ask God, **"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"** They're saying they've supplied the *quo*, but God hasn't come through with the *quid*. But the Lord answers in the passage selected to be our reading this morning. He reprimands them. He tells them that the problem is their behavior. Even while they're fasting, they're still doing evil things—they're ignoring the poor and fighting among themselves. What he's looking for is people with a heart to cling to him in trust. Then the **"light"** that **"shall rise in darkness"** will be the light of the Lord's presence in them shining out of his people for this dark world to see. God wants his people to do good works, but not so that they can gain his favor. He wants us to do them to shine him forth for all to see. Jesus said, **"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."** (Matthew 5:16 NRSV)

Our gospel reading gives us another example of God reprimanding a religious person for neglecting God himself. The synagogue leader no doubt thought he was pleasing God by enforcing the Fourth Commandment: **"Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy."** (Exodus 20:8 NRSV) But Jesus isn't focused on keeping the rules. He's focused on bringing glory to his Father by bringing the Father's love and power into the life of this disabled woman. He reprimands the whole class of religious people in Israel by telling off the synagogue leader. He says, **"You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"**

The leader of the synagogue was a religious man. That's how he became the leader. Above all, he wanted to honor God. He thought he was honoring God by enforcing obedience to God's commandments. Yet God himself, the second Person of the Trinity is standing right in front of him. When Jesus heals this poor woman he brings the glory of God's future kingdom of light and perfection into the darkness and suffering of this present age—for everybody to see. But all the synagogue leader can do is take Jesus to task for healing on the Sabbath.

The part of the Bible that most clearly makes the distinction between religion and faith is probably the Letter to the Hebrews. Nobody knows who wrote it, and in many ways it doesn't really resemble a letter at all. The text doesn't explicitly say that it was written to Jewish believers in Christ, but since about 175 A.D. it's been called "The Letter to the Hebrews." The reason is that it makes many references to Old Testament history and ceremonial practices and explains how the New Covenant in Jesus Christ is superior to the Old Covenant. In fact, the Letter to the Hebrews is the source of the term "New Covenant." (Hebrews 8:3, quoting Jeremiah 31:31. Also in 12:24, which we read this morning.)

In our reading, the writer is contrasting the terrifying appearance of God to Moses and the Israelites on Mount Sinai with what faith in Jesus has provided for them. He is reminding his audience that they are worshipping the same God who appeared in such fearsome majesty to their ancestors, the God who is **"a consuming fire."**

"Well," you might say, "that was the Old Testament God. The New Testament God is a God of love and acceptance." That's one of the classic errors that people make. The same God is described in both the Old and New Testaments. He is **"a consuming fire."** His fiery judgment consumes his enemies, both in the Old Testament and the New. But in the New Testament some of those enemies are included in the Son of God Jesus Christ in his death on the cross.

This is what's behind the statement in our reading that the people the writer is addressing have come **"to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."** You'll remember that Cain and Abel were the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain became jealous of Abel, and while they were out in the field, he killed him. The Bible says, **"Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' And the Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!'"** (Genesis 4:9-10 NRSV) Abel's blood crying out

to God isn't just a figure of speech. What God is saying here is that the cruelty and injustice of Abel's murder is offending God himself. By inflicting death on his brother, Cain had offended the God who is the author of life, and has created all human beings in his image.

The consummate human tragedy is that Abel's murder has been repeated countless billions of times in human history. Think of the magnitude of the offense against God that has been generated by the accumulated disobedience of the human race over millennia of time! We all feel the deep outrage of injustice. We feel it because injustice is first and foremost an outrage against God's justice. God is the definition of justice. That's why Abel's blood cried out to him—God's own justice had been violated. So what is **“the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel?”** It's the blood of Jesus shed on the cross to pay for the injustice each one of us has perpetrated against the God of justice. The idea that the New Testament shows us a God of love and acceptance who has somehow “evolved” from the God of the Old Testament is false. Think about it: if I were to commit some horrible offense against you and your families, and the bishop or the courts just said, **“Don't worry about it, Mario. Just don't let it happen again,”** would that be justice? Of course not. That kind of lack of accountability is injustice, not justice. And the same is true for our sinful human race. God's love is infinite and overwhelming, but it in no way overcomes his justice. He exacted justice for your sins and mine in the body of his own Son Jesus Christ on the cross 2,000 years ago. That's where his acceptance and love are located. He has exempted those who trust in Jesus from his terrible justice.

Let me close with a quote from Shakespeare that says it all. This is part of a speech on justice from Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*. It summarizes the reality of God's mercy in the face of his perfect justice. The speech is addressed to Shylock, who is pleading for justice, for his legal rights, though at someone else's expense. He is told,

**Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.¹**

That's where religion gets it wrong. We don't please God by doing things for him that we think he might like. We don't please God by pleading for justice for other people and ignoring the justice from God that our own sins

¹ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, scene 1; 196-200

deserve. We please God by putting our trust in what he has done for us: in Jesus' death on the cross, God exempts those who trust in Christ from the reality of God's perfect justice. So as we approach the table of the Lord this morning, let's thank God for his great mercy—and his justice. Amen.