

The Family of God III, February 15, 2004

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Psalm 51; 1 Corinthians 5:9-13; John 8:1-11

Intro:

Last week we focused on the family of God as a place where sinners are welcomed. We recalled Jesus' story of the prodigal son and the loving Father who welcomed him home. We were cautioned by the example of the older brother who refused to welcome the prodigal, and I went so far as to say that, if there are those whom you would refuse to welcome home, you may well be far from the Father, even as you live and work in the very precincts of his house.

However, that leaves an important question unanswered: What of those who continue in sin, claiming grace, trying to claim the robe and ring, rushing to eat the feast, without ever even trying to leave the pigsty? Does the story of the prodigal, does the nature of grace itself, make it impossible for us to act any differently toward those who are living wild,

impenitent lives, and those who are striving against the sin and brokenness that they see and hate in their own lives?

The testimony of Scripture is quite challenging. It calls us to exercise discernment and a kind of discriminating judgment in our behavior toward others, but without ever surrendering the compassion that should always mark the people of God. And it turns on its head the typical response that we usually make in the face of rebellion and sin, whether in our own lives, or in the lives of others. It calls us to recognize whether or not a person claims to be a child of God, and whether or not a person is seeking to get free of bondage to the sin that is holding them back from the life of freedom that God offers through Jesus Christ.

It is usually easy to find a text of Scripture to support one's position. It is much more important and instructive to place next to each other several texts that deal with the same issue, and try to discover a pattern of wisdom in responding to what are always complex issues when applied to the flesh and blood reality of the people whom we know and love. So, texts such as the three we have read this morning must

stand together, interpreting and completing one another, so that we might know what it means to pursue both the purity and the peace that should mark the family of God.

Body:

1. The Scriptures call us to face the reality of sin and brokenness, even in within the family of God (Psa 51):

Remember the events leading up to the writing of this Psalm: David was not with his troops, as he ought to have been; he committed adultery with the wife of one of his finest warriors, then tried to cover up her pregnancy, and finally had her husband killed to hide his own wickedness. This is the one described as "a man after God's own heart."

Trouble would follow David because of his sin, yet the Lord would forgive him, and though the first child of his union with Bathsheba would die, the second, Solomon, would receive the throne from David, and would become an ancestor of our Lord Jesus. God is able to take the most broken parts of our lives, if only we will give them to him, and make of them something beautiful for his glory and for our good.

2. The Scriptures call us to make a surprising distinction between those who are part of the family of God and those who are not (1 Cor 5):

What Paul describes here is the exact opposite of the distinction we ordinarily make. Often, we turn our backs on those who do not profess Christ and who live wild lives. But we seek out professing Christians, and stand ready to overlook any sin in them on the basis of the fact that we are all sinners.

But Paul tells us that we should do just the opposite. It is those outside the family of God that we are to take as they are, but those who profess to be God's children whom we should hold to a higher standard – beginning with ourselves! We must be careful here: Paul is not calling us to spend our time running with a bunch of wild pagans. His letters, and the rest of Scripture (e.g., Psalm 1) stand against any such interpretation. But he is simply saying, do not expect people who are not Christians to act as though they were.

Nor is he telling us that we should be constantly offended at brothers and sisters in Christ who are struggling with sin.

Here, we must remember William Barclay's wise words, "There is a sinner who hates his sin; and there is a sinner who loves his sin. There is a sinner who sins against his will; there is a sinner who deliberately sins. It is not the repentant sinner, but the defiant sinner, who is barred from the city of God" (in his commentary on Revelation).

3. Finally, the Scriptures call us to show compassion without distinction to all those whose hearts are broken and contrite over their sin (Joh 8):

We know that this poor woman dragged before Jesus had been "set up" in order to try to trap Jesus. By the first century, the requirement in Israel for convicting someone of adultery was more stringent than the requirement laid down in Scripture. In Jesus' day, the Rabbis required two eyewitnesses to the act of adultery itself, and both the man and woman had to be brought together to trial. But here, the woman was brought alone; the man had been permitted to escape, and if those who brought her were actually eyewitnesses, they almost certainly must have overseen her

seduction, so that they could watch from hiding and catch her in the act

Jesus' response is instructive: He simply says, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." He lets the men's own hearts convict them, and they walk away, beginning with the oldest. He speaks words of grace and compassion to the woman, as she stands before him exposed and humiliated, but his words leave no doubt that he expects her to change from this moment on: "Neither do I condemn you. Now go and leave your life of sin." She must not continue to live as she has.

Grace is not license to live as I please because God loves me. Here is the missing message in so much "grace" teaching today. Either we condemn the broken person, heaping on wrath and condemnation, casting them aside, forgetting what great grace has been shown to us; or we fall in the ditch on the other side of the road to life, by offering grace and forgiveness, and restoring fellowship to someone who is still living a lie, someone who wants to have one foot in the Father's house and the other still in the pigsty.

Concl:

In the story of the prodigal son and the gracious and forgiving Father, the Father ran to meet the son as the son returned home with a broken and contrite heart. So also, in our texts today, each response we see is intended to bring the sinner to repentance, to produce that "broken and contrite heart" that the Lord will never despise, and that we dare not despise if we would receive forgiveness and mercy.

This is always the key: God alone is judge, for he alone is righteous and only he knows the truth about each one of us. Our discipline is always to be remedial, never punitive, always aimed at producing repentance, never at casting away and refusing to forgive. We are, within the family of God, to show grace that is greater than all our sin. But grace is for the penitent, and until the heart is broken, the most gracious thing that we can do is to say, "I love you too much to walk this way with you. I'll always be here, waiting and longing for your return. Come home! Why will you die? Come home to the family of God."

Whenever we see the Prodigal coming with that broken and contrite heart, we must run to greet him, as our Father once ran to meet us, with a robe and a ring and an invitation to the family feast, where we sit in the presence of love himself, who came into the world to call sinners like you and me to repentance.

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