

1 Epiphany 3 – Matthew 8

The law declares all people to be sinful and unclean. God was so determined to teach this to his people Israel that he even attached certain outward signs to his law. He made a distinction between clean and unclean animals, along with other ceremonies that declared people clean or unclean. For example, a continual bodily discharge would make someone unclean. If anyone touched a dead body, then he would be unclean for a while. If someone had leprosy or other kinds of skin disorders, then he would also be considered unclean. He had to stay outside of the camp, isolated from everyone else, until his leprosy went away.

These ceremonies were not moral laws. That is to say, it wasn't morally wrong for a woman to go through that monthly process all women must go through. Unclean animals were not evil in themselves, but they were created by God himself. And it was not sinful for someone to have leprosy. Instead, these were object lessons given by God to teach the people that apart from his mercy they are unclean and that he is the one who makes them clean and holy. The fact that these ceremonies were so inconvenient and difficult to follow was meant to teach the people how heavy the load of the law truly was. No matter how much they tried, they could never free themselves of uncleanness. In the same way, their best efforts could never purify their hearts of sin.

At the center of all these ceremonies were the sacrifices of God. When a leper was pronounced clean, he was to present himself before the priest. The priest would sacrifice a bird and spill out the blood with running water. And then, using a living bird, a hyssop branch, along with cedar and scarlet, he would sprinkle the first bird's blood onto the man who had leprosy. This ceremony was used to declare him clean of his leprosy. But underneath this ceremony was a much deeper meaning than just letting someone come back into the assembly. Through this ritual, God was teaching something very special. He was teaching that he, the Lord, would provide the sacrifice to make us clean from sin. David, in his great song of repentance in Psalm 51, expresses it this way:

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice.
Hide Thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.
Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me with Thy free Spirit. (Ps. 51:7-12)

The ceremonies of the law can only make someone outwardly clean. But the true hyssop is the Holy Spirit who sprinkles living water upon us, cleansing us of our sins with the blood of Christ, the true sacrifice provided by God. As David also sang in Psalm 65, "Iniquities prevail against me; as for our transgressions, You will provide atonement for them." Hidden underneath this ceremony of the law was an even greater promise spoken through God's prophets. He gave this promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Through their Seed, through their Descendant, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. As Isaiah foretold, "He shall sprinkle many nations." Many shall come from the east and the west to sit at the feast of salvation, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob the Blessed obeying the Lord's invitation. This promise of salvation is for all people. And it is only through this promise that the Holy Spirit creates a clean heart within us.

2 Epiphany 3 – Matthew 8

Faith is the only thing that grasps God's promise to cleanse us from our sins. The law teaches us and guides us, but it cannot give this faith. It cannot purify our hearts. St. Peter described the law and its various ceremonies and regulations as a yoke, which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear (Acts 15:10). Instead, he said that our hearts are purified through faith (Acts 15:9).

Only faith can make you clean before God. Because only faith lays hold of God's promise in Christ. Our works will never do this. The law can never give you life. But here is the great thing about the law. This is exactly what you learn from the law when you try to fulfill it. You learn how difficult – how impossible – it is to be pure in the sight of God by your own strength and efforts. You learn, through experience, that you cannot rely on your own will power, but that you are altogether unworthy to stand before God.

Our Gospel lesson from Matthew chapter 8 tells of two men who knew this from experience. They were both unclean according to the law. The one was a leper. The other was a Roman Centurion. The one couldn't live with the rest of the people. Because of the ceremonial requirements of the law, he couldn't see his friends and family. Wherever he went he was required to warn people by shouting, "Unclean! Unclean!" The other was an outsider, uncircumcised, working for the Roman government.

The man with leprosy knew from experience how heavy the yoke of the law was. But he trusted in Jesus. When he saw Jesus, he worshipped him. He called him Lord. The book of Leviticus written by Moses was the book that gave the regulations about how to deal with those with leprosy and others who were unclean. But there was one promise, which stood out and was continually repeated throughout the law of Moses. This is the statement: "I am the LORD who makes you holy." Even though this leper was all too familiar with the regulations spelled out concerning leprosy, his faith laid hold of this precious promise: I am the LORD who makes you holy. He has heard about Jesus, and he is given faith to cling to him. His faith clings to the same promise with this firm conviction: This is the Lord who sanctifies. This is the Lord who makes clean. So with this faith, he bows down and worships Jesus as Lord. And he says, "Lord, if you are willing (if you want to) you can make me clean."

This man's faith did not rely on his own will but only on the will of the Lord. He knew that if Jesus wanted to then he could make him clean. This isn't a shaky faith, unsure of whether Jesus' will is good. No, it is a firm faith in God's promise, by which this man resigns himself entirely to the Lord's will. He knows that whatever Jesus wants to do will be good. And consider the boldness of this leper's faith. The law said that he was to stay away, warning people with a chant, "Unclean! Unclean!" Yet, what does he do when he sees Jesus? He approaches him. Because he recognized someone who was much greater than the ceremonies. Much greater than the regulations to make someone outwardly clean was the sure promise: "I am the LORD who makes you holy." Tightly clinging to this promise, he entrusts himself to Jesus as the Lord who saves and makes clean. And Jesus responded. I am willing, he said. I want to make you clean. Jesus' will is united to his promise, and this is why this leprous man's faith was not in vain. According to Jesus' Word, he was immediately cleansed of his leprosy.

3 Epiphany 3 – Matthew 8

The Centurion was also familiar with God's law. Luke records that the people there told Jesus that the Centurion was a worthy man, because he had built their synagogue for them. But the Centurion had learned something much more valuable from the law. He said to Jesus, "I am not worthy to have you come into my home." The law taught him his unworthiness. But like the leper, this Centurion had faith. In fact, Jesus said it was faith unlike anything he had seen in all of Israel. While many in Israel were trying to lower the bar for themselves, watering down the law with their own traditions, the Centurion had nowhere else to turn than the promise of God. As a military official, he knew from experience what it was like to be under authority, and he knew what it was like to have others under his authority. He therefore said to Jesus, "Just say the word, and my servant will be healed."

Jesus was amazed by this faith. The man understood what it was like being under authority. And he recognized and trusted in Jesus as the one who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Jesus had put himself under the authority of his own law to fulfill for all people what we could not accomplish. But through Jesus' humility, the Centurion still recognizes the Lord of the universe. So he asks him simply to say the word. He knows purely based on Jesus' Word that his servant will be healed.

Now if the man with leprosy had a bold faith, then this Centurion certainly had a bold faith as well. He was confident that Jesus' Word would accomplish what he sent it out to do. But there is another fruit of faith, which we should learn from both men. They both had love. Love always flows from faith. The leper obeyed Jesus after he was healed. He was told to show himself to the priest and do everything Moses said to do in his law. Jesus was going to put an end to all sacrifices and ceremonies from the law, giving himself as the true sacrifice, which makes purification for all sin. But until then, he taught this man to fulfill his duty, not out of coercion as one who is under the law, but as a testimony to them. This is what love does. It doesn't obey the law out of force, like a slave who needs to be threatened. No, love bears witness to the truth. And in doing this, it fulfills the law.

The Centurion came to Jesus on behalf of his servant who was lying paralyzed at home. He didn't look down on his servant as someone with a lower status than him. He didn't count his own needs more important than those of his servant. He loved him. This was love, which, as St. Paul says, flows from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith (1 Tim 1:5). He didn't despise the lowliness of his servant. Instead, he recognized that they both had the same Lord and Master in Jesus Christ. This is the love flowing from the same source as boldness and humility. It flows from faith in the promise of God.

When you strive to do your duty in whatever kind of station God has placed you, then you learn from experience how heavy the law is. You learn how difficult it is to love your neighbor as yourself and God above all things. You learn that you need to be much more than outwardly clean. You need your heart and conscience to be cleansed by the blood of Christ. This is why your faith never rests on how good of a job you have done, whether you are exercising authority or you are under authority. But it clings only to the promise of God in Christ Jesus. He who humbled himself to save you from your sins will not despise your humility. He will bear with you in love. And he will give boldness to your faith always with his holy, precious Word. He is the LORD who makes you holy. Amen.