

Trinity 3 - Luke 15

Sometimes it is the enemies of the gospel who articulate the gospel very clearly. When the Jewish council was meeting to discuss what to do about Jesus, the high priest Caiaphas said that one man should die for the people so that the whole nation should not perish. Caiaphas thought he was making a good political point. He was afraid that the Romans would take away Israel's political power, so he thought that if Jesus were put to death by the Romans then this would keep the Romans from destroying the whole nation. But the irony is that Caiaphas was in fact articulating exactly why Jesus came. He came to die in the place of the people. In fact, he came to die in the place of all people. Sometimes the enemies of the gospel end up articulating the gospel quite well.

St. Paul says that some people preach Christ out of selfish ambition and others preach Christ out of love. In either case, he rejoices that Christ is being preached (Phil 1:16 ff.).

Of course, this is not to say that we shouldn't be on our guard against the enemies of the gospel. Beware of false prophets. They come as wolves in sheep's clothing. Our Lord gives us the responsibility as his sheep to listen to his voice and avoid the strange teachings of those who would lead us astray. And yet, the fact that even the enemies of the truth can't help but speak the truth is a testimony to the power of the gospel.

Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners. These would have been noted sinners, people who had done what everyone knew and recognized was very evil. Jesus was not affirming them in their sin. He wasn't accepting them as they were. No, Jesus took sin seriously. He preached to everyone, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is here!" Those who recognized their need for repentance heard his call. He sat with them, unashamed of their public shame, eager to teach them of God's grace and the new life in his kingdom. Jesus always warned against sin and the deceitful pleasures of this earthly life. But one detail stuck out over all of his teaching. It was that he received sinners and ate with them.

This is what the Pharisees and Bible scholars noticed. They counted Jesus as their enemy, so they were always on their guard to look for something of which they could accuse him. Here was what seemed like a perfect opportunity to do exactly that. Jesus was sitting with notorious sinners, with tax collectors who were known for overcharging their fellow Israelites and selling out to the Roman occupiers. These people tore families apart. They were traitors of their own people. And here Jesus is, sitting and eating with them.

So the Pharisees and Bible scholars make the accusation: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!"

Ironically, these enemies of the gospel clearly articulate the very substance of the gospel. Jesus sinners doth receive! Oh may all this saying ponder! Listen to the preaching of these enemies! Because in spite of themselves, they are declaring the very ground of your faith.

Our Lord is willing to be numbered among the transgressors. He came to bear the guilt of all and reconcile sinners to the living God. His grace abounds so much that there is nothing his enemies can do to stop it. Even when they crucify him, they are only carrying out what the prophets declared. The chastisement that brought us peace was upon him. It was the will of the Lord to crush him. We all like sheep have gone astray, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. This is the sweetest comfort for those who seek release from a guilty conscience. There is nothing so shameful you have done that keeps this from being true. Jesus receives sinners and eats with them.

The enemies of the gospel will often articulate the gospel, but they will speak of it like it is a bad thing. It's dangerous, they say, to tell people that Jesus took away all sin. Then they might think that it's ok for them to go on sinning.

But this misses the point about the gospel. There is a difference between the application of the gospel and the gospel message itself. To apply the gospel takes wisdom. You should not tell someone who is stubbornly living in his sin and refusing to repent that his sins have been forgiven. You should not apply this precious truth to such a person, because he will just trample it under his feet. Those who think they are already well have no need of a physician. This is why Jesus tells us not to throw what is holy to the dogs or cast pearls before swine.

And yet, the holy things remain holy even if they are trampled underfoot. Even if the swine cover them with mud and filth, the precious words of the gospel remain the precious pearl of God's grace in his Son. The statement is still true: Jesus receives sinners. When people misuse this statement as a license to sin, it doesn't change what Jesus did. Jesus took away the sin of the world. He bore the sin of all people, even the most notorious of sinners, in his own body, and he nailed the record of guilt to his cross. That many do not receive this and believe this is a testimony of God's judgment against them. That many use it as a license to indulge in their own carnal passions only makes them ripe for destruction. But the truth of the gospel – the fact that Jesus rose from the dead after freeing all people from sin – still remains an accomplished fact. As he declared from the cross right before he gave up his spirit, "It is finished."

While we should take seriously the task of applying the truth of the gospel, our application of the gospel is not what makes it true. Those who think they are doing just fine don't need to hear the gospel. They need to hear the law. All have sinned and fall short of God's glory. They need to be warned of God's judgment. He will judge the idol worshiper, the greedy, the fornicator and the adulterer, the murderer, the thief, and all those who practice evil. We should take these warnings seriously. If they terrify you and drive you to despair of yourself, then good. That's what the law is meant to do. Turn from your evil ways. Plead guilty.

But don't imagine that how you respond to the law is what will make the gospel true. You can't make Jesus your Savior. He already is your Savior. You can't make him your Lord. God has declared him the Lord of all in his resurrection. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And only faith planted in a broken and contrite heart can recognize this truth and embrace it as your own.

The enemies of the gospel don't like the gospel, because they are afraid it will be abused. Jesus knows better than anyone that his precious gospel is abused. And yet, he still proclaims it. He still goes to the cross. He allows his precious blood to pour out into the gutter. He bears the sin of all. Where sin abounds, where his mercy is exploited and abused, his grace abounds all the more. The enemies object to the free grace of God in Christ, but in their objection they are only magnifying the power of the gospel all the more.

Almost five centuries ago, the papacy convened a council in the Italian city of Trent. This council was meant to respond to the teachings of the Reformation. The council then listed what they held to be the true teachings of the church, and they also listed what they held to be false teachings. They said that anyone who teaches these false teachings is anathema. Anathema is a word St. Paul uses in Galatians 1. He says that if anyone, even an angel from heaven, declares a different gospel, then let him be anathema. Anathema means to be cursed. It means to be given up to God's judgment. It is true that those who preach a different gospel are anathema. But leave it to the enemies of the gospel to call the gospel itself anathema. And yet, as they call the gospel

anathema, they end up articulating exactly what the gospel is. This is what the Council of Trent did. One of their statements goes as follows:

If anyone says that by faith alone the ungodly is justified in such a way that nothing else is required for him to cooperate to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will, then let him be anathema.

Here, even while they condemn it, they clearly articulate the gospel truth. St. Paul teaches, “He who does not work but trusts in God who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Rom 4:5). Again, he says, “It is not of him who wills nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy” (Rom 9:16). Jesus tells us that the flesh accomplishes nothing. It is only the Spirit who gives life (John 6:63). Nothing in ourselves, nothing in our own will, nothing in our own preparations can make us righteous before God. This is the clear teaching of Scripture. Jesus Christ alone is our righteousness (1 Cor 1:30; Jer 23; 33). He alone has justified us by grace. We are declared righteous and forgiven of our sins only through faith in this precious promise (Rom 3:28).

The enemies of the gospel declare him anathema who teaches this. But the Scriptures call him blessed who believes it. By condemning the gospel, they ironically articulate it very well. Jesus responds to his enemies by inviting them to rejoice in what they have been grumbling about. He gives the example of a shepherd who leaves his other sheep in the wilderness to find that one lost sheep. When he finds it, he invites all his friends to rejoice. A woman sweeps her house and lights a lamp to find that one lost coin, and when she finds it, she celebrates with her neighbors. So there is more rejoicing among the angels in heaven over one sinner who repents. Jesus calls on the enemies of the gospel to rejoice, because this is the only proper response of the gospel. It is joy flowing out of faith.

We can't add anything to the gospel. The free gift is meant to be believed and confessed with joy. Don't be cynical about the fact that many don't appreciate it, that many will use it as a cloak for their own vice and evil living. God will expose the hypocrites in his own time. But in the meantime, this precious gift remains true, whether people are denying it, mocking it, or condemning it.

The enemies of the gospel often end up articulating the gospel truth. This is a great irony. But today we who believe it should consider how precious it is. The gospel is meant to be believed, taught, and confessed. Jesus gives another parable of a father who welcomes his sinful and lost boy, forgives him, and rejoices over his return. The older brother is upset, because his screw-up brother was getting a party. He thought he deserved praise instead of his brother. But his father articulated to his son exactly the essence of the gospel. Son, he said, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.

God therefore gives this message to fathers to teach it to their children. I want to emphasize this especially on Fathers' Day. Children, you should obey and honor our fathers. They discipline you for your God. But if you especially want to honor your father, then ask him about Jesus. Give him the honor to teach you something about your Savior. Talk about the gospel. And fathers, don't be afraid to articulate this precious truth to your children. You may not feel adequate to do so. But remember that God's grace abounds. We are all vessels of clay. We never apply this precious truth perfectly. But God's grace continues to abound in Christ. His Word will not return empty. Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. He declares them righteous by his blood. Those who believe this have exactly what God promises, the forgiveness of sins. If anyone confesses this and teaches it to his children, then he is blessed. Whatever shortcomings or

disappointments or shame we find in ourselves or in one another does not compare to this precious truth of our Savior. So confess it and rejoice in it, because no one can take this joy away from you. Amen