

He is Your Life

6afterEpiphany

Pastor Josh Frazee

Deut. 30:15-20

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This morning we look at another challenging passage: our Old Testament text. Our passage from Deuteronomy is not challenging because it has been heard so frequently like the Beatitudes, but for a different reason. The problem is that it has been used time and again to support decision-theology. And with only the text as it is laid out in the lectionary, it is far too easy to slip into that line of thinking ourselves.

Decision-theology is the idea that we can make the choice to follow God of ourselves, of our own power. It ignores that we are born blind, dead enemies of God, and it ignores the Word of God which precedes this passage.

Just before our text, Moses quotes God saying these words: “For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear and do it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?” But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.”

Luther in the ninth volume of his works makes this portion a bit more clear. In his day, as in ours, there were those who believed that they could do the works of their own power. They are the ones who would think all it takes is for someone to speak the Word to them and they can do it. Luther wrote that these people are presumptuous, trusting in their own power. But as we heard last week, it takes more than simply hearing the Word, it must be that the Word takes root and blossoms as a whole new tree, a good tree—a salty, Light-giving tree like a city on a hill which cannot be hidden.

It is not that those who have the Word rooted in their heart will not do good works, but that some pretend to hear the Word and do good works, but do the works by their own hand, rather than from their heart, where the Word must take root.

That is why Moses quoted God saying, “the word...is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.” It is in the mouth first because it must be preached to you; and then it is from your heart, once it has taken root in the entirety of your life.

Now that we have covered that the Word comes first through preaching—that Word which is from God—and then comes the reaction from the heart, now we will consider our Old Testament text.

Verse 1

“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply...But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish.”

Once God has reminded the Israelites that He was the one who came to them in His Word—not that they had come to Him by their own works—He calls them to task before all of creation in “life and good, death and evil.” If the Israelites obeyed Him from their hearts, it would mean good and life. But if they turned and rebelled, He would be justified in punishing them with death and evil.

Again, it would be very easy to think that God was asking the Israelites to do something which they did not have the power to do without any Word from Him. But the Israelites had been saved by God's grace. They had been delivered from Pharaoh and his armies. And the Israelites had just received God's Word a second time. We're looking at the book of Deuteronomy, which means something like "second law." This is because it is the second giving of the Law.

Before this second giving of the Law, the people of Israel had been spurning God's grace in delivering them from Pharaoh and establishing with them a covenant of grace. That spurning was from their hearts. It would only be by trusting and believing God's Word of covenantal grace that they would have their hearts turned back to Him. He had showed them His faithfulness and love, His power of deliverance—now it was up to them to either trust Him with the power He had given them through His Word, or to continue to spurn Him.

Have we not been saved by God's grace, dear brothers and sisters in Christ? Yet too often this leads us to think that if we only hear this Word, we will then be able to do it. But if that were the case, then God could have just sent someone to preach to us, and we would have had no need of His Son as our Savior. No, hearing and doing are not enough; it must come from the preaching of the Word in full truth and doctrine, and belief in that Word from our hearts, which is the means by which you and I receive the gifts of grace. Without faith in our hearts we do not receive God's gifts. The demons knew and still know what Jesus did on the cross, but they do not believe on it. Their hearts have not been changed.

Verse 2

God continues in our text: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse."

The stakes are high in that one sentence, that one statement from God to His people Israel. Life or death. God had shown them grace time and again, and had given His Word to them that if they believed on it, they might have life. Unfortunately, we know how this turns out. The Israelites continue to spurn God's grace until finally they are denied entrance into the Promised Land—all but Joshua and Caleb. Even Moses dies with the Israelites—yet because of his faith, he is permitted to see the Promised Land from afar before he dies, and then God Himself buried him. Not so the rest of the Israelites. The rest of them died in the wilderness and in God's wrath.

Don't fool yourselves into thinking you can have a surface-level faith and get by, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. God desires to have all of you, down to your very hearts. God loves a cheerful giver—and that cheer comes from the heart. God desires for you to choose life—that is, to trust His promises, but that, also, can only come from your heart.

As with the Israelites, God has given you what you need to love Him from your heart. He has shown you His grace in His own Son's death and resurrection. He has given you His Word, especially as it is preached and taught in the Church. This is why we heard earlier that God spoke through Moses that "the word...is in your mouth and in your heart"—because it is first preached to you, and then it takes root in your heart by the work of God's Holy Spirit.

Verse 3

"Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days."

God told the Israelites to believe in Him in their hearts, choosing life rather than death. He had saved them and His Word had been proclaimed to them, so they had the Spirit's power to believe with their hearts, if they did not turn from Him. The end of our text, the part I left off, is specifically for the Israelites who were almost to the lands of Canaan. If they would have turned, God would have allowed them to enter the land of Canaan, just as He had promised to their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He would have let them live long in that land, and reap from its bounty. God earnestly desired that they would have turned and believed Him from their hearts, as He earnestly desires with all people.

Every day, you and I face the same choice: belief and life or scorning God's promises and dying. Yet it is not by your power that God has you choose. Again, if it were by your power, He would not have had to send His Son. But God sent His Son so that you might be saved, and then He sent You His Spirit, so that your hearts might be changed to trust and believe in Him.

But note that this is not an immediate thing. Do not try inspecting your own fruits, your own good works to try to see if are worthy, because each of us would continue to come up far short. No, don't count your works, but simply trust and believe on the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for you, that you might be able to trust and believe from your heart. As it says in the Scriptures "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." In Jesus' Name. Amen.