

There is a scene in the holiday movie, “A Christmas Story,” in which the main character Ralphie and his friends challenge one of them to touch his tongue to the metal flagpole in winter to see if it is true that it will stick. They dare him. He doesn’t want to take them seriously because it is only a dare. They double dare him, then they double-dog dare him and he feels the pressure as the situation escalates. All resistance fails him when they skip over the triple dare and go straight for the triple dog dare, which is like the nuclear option or something. They were serious. He *had* to comply. It worked. His tongue stuck to the pole. The bell rang and everyone went back to class. The fire department had to come rescue him.

Of course, the film is making playful fun of the childishness of such interchanges. In reality there is no more reason to take seriously a triple-dog dare than a simple dare and neither is a foundation for foolishness. That is what makes it funny.

Sermon on the Mount

In the Sermon on the Mount, there is a technique used that is also meant to deepen the seriousness which we apply the gospel demands. In a series of antitheses Jesus heightens the stakes by saying, “you have heard

. . . , but I say . . .” The first one is example enough. “You have heard that it has been said, ‘do not commit murder.’ But I say, ‘Do not be angry in your heart.’” The external act is contrasted to the inward state.

The purpose of the antitheses is to motivate us to a deepening of our faith by a summons to the care of the inner life. In the reading today there are four examples; the one about murder that has already been mentioned, adultery, divorce, and the swearing of oaths, which comes close to the daring of dares and like in the movie we are instructed not to be serious only when we have piled on words as if our intentions are not real unless they are expressed in an emphatic way. We are meant not just to say that we believe, but to actually *be* faithful.

The Blameless Ones

The temptation of the expositor, in this case me, is to spend some time on each of the points, as if the congregation is unaware of the relationship with and difference between murder and anger, adultery and lust, divorce and mercilessness, and the deceitfulness of words.

I am inclined to resist that temptation and focus on the moral logic that pervades human thinking and the way in which our interpretation of the biblical message

seems to undergird it. Sometimes it seems like the Sermon on the Mount is piling on difficult demands.

A good starting place is the text from Psalm 119 found at the top of the order of service. "Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the laws of the Lord." There is a simple logic that makes good sense and involves the idea that God wants us to do good and that we are rewarded when we do what is right and punished for wrong. That seems fair.

The temptation here is to take the bible seriously by trying always to do what is right. But I am going to challenge the notion that it sums up the biblical message. I don't mean to be controversial here, I guess I do mean to be provocative. God *is* a God of righteousness. But that is not the final truth of the Bible, or at least something else must also be said. And it is a good thing too because any honest analysis will reveal our failures to always do good.

Jesus raises the stakes by teaching that it isn't enough to *do* good or refrain from evil but that our hearts also condemn us. We are meant to *be* as well as *do* good. The temptation here is to take Jesus seriously by trying to cleanse the inner life, to create habits of the heart that eliminate anger and lust and hardheartedness and deceit so that we are better able to live up to the gift we have been given.

But even this deepening of things is not the climax of the biblical message. And it is a good thing too because we are no more able to be perfectly good inwardly than we are to act outwardly in perfect goodness. This heightening of things is meant to lead us somewhere, it is not the destination.

So I will just come out and say it, blessed are those whose ways are blameless is not true. If the greater message of the bible is taken into account, then it is not enough to be free of anger and lust and mercilessness and deceit.

Silence

In so far as the bible leads us on a journey of spiritual growth, when we reach the place of trying to perfect the inner life we must not believe the destination has been reached. The journey ends tragically when we discover the inability to meet the demands. The journey leads us to silence before the truth that by the actions of our lives and the attitudes of our hearts we are unacceptable to God.

Whatever benefit we receive from the effort, we are like King Arthur at the end of Camelot when everything has been lost and he is in despair livened only by the idea that the stories and thus the hope of perfection

will live on. We have been challenged beyond our capacity for goodness.

We must be in agreement with Paul as he expresses it in Romans 3:19, “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.”

If we take the dare of inner perfection, then in our efforts we are like the child who took the dare, and are left foolishly out in the cold with our hearts stuck to a frozen pole, in need of rescue, unable to speak.

It is as silly for us to think that we can achieve a greater righteousness than any of our neighbors as it was for Ralphie and his friends in that old movie to be moved by a triple-dog dare; to think we can generate for ourselves a better inner life, be less in need of grace than anyone else.

The Gospel Hope

And again, we hear from Paul in Romans, who was able to both understand and put down in writing the powerful implications of the Jesus gospel. “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.” That is,

it is not a moral achievement or an accomplishment of self-improvement. It is a gift from God.

You have heard that it has been said, “blessed are those whose ways are blameless,” but I say to you that no one is blameless; blessed are those who through grace have been accepted by God, even though they don't deserve it, who by Grace God, sees through the lens of Christ, who has become our blamelessness for us, so that we can share in the inheritance, which is eternal life.

We are the ones who have been accepted. It is from the spring of God's gracious acceptance through Christ's sacrifice that we have been liberated from the burdensome demand and that all our goodness comes.

Accepting Christ by faith we begin the journey that is known theologically as sanctification (being made holy). I must admit that it is a mystery, but the way in which anger and lust and hardheartedness and dishonesty are removed from our hearts and replaced by compassion and honesty and humility and the willingness to forgive is by accepting God's gift faithfully, submitting to God's will, because in the Gospel we are not being overwhelmed by, but liberated from the burdensome demands.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)