

“Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation,” that is how the reading from Paul’s Epistle to the Romans begins. We have an obligation. What is this obligation? Paul begins by saying what it is not. It is not an obligation to the flesh, that is, to the sinful nature, to live according to it.

Now, the “flesh,” which is a literal translation, refers to that quality in human nature that attaches us to this bodily life, to live as if we believe that material life is all there is and is the essence of life. Often this is associated with sexual desire or the impulses to eat and drink and seek pleasure.

But there is more to it than that. There are creative impulses that compel us to make new things, reconfigure the framework of life, transform technology, and change the world. All of these things can be healthy, good, and right. But when we live as though we are obligated to them as to God, they can also be destructive, harmful, and lead to excesses and distortions.

Whatever we might say about human nature and about sin, we do experience it as a kind of obligation. It is the human condition, felt by everyone in every time and every place. It is universal and inescapable, the influence of the sinful nature. We either subject it to an higher authority, or it governs us.

When Paul says, “we have an obligation,” he also says, “it is not an obligation to the flesh.”

### The Calling of Isaiah

Isaiah was a leading Israelite prophet around 2800 years ago. When he surveyed the landscape of Israel’s life, like many of us today, he too saw distortion and chaos. It was not, however, a vision of the world’s shortcomings and dysfunctions that changed Isaiah’s life and made him a prophet. Instead it was a vision of the majesty and holiness of God.

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, seated on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple.”

Above the Lord in this vision, “were two seraphs, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling out to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, the whole earth is full of God’s glory. At the sound of their voices the doorposts and the thresholds shook, and the temple was filled with smoke.’”

Then we are told that the effect of this vision is that Isaiah became aware of how far short he fell. He became aware of his own shame. “Woe to me,” I cried, “for I am a man of unclean lips. I live among a people

of unclean lips, *and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord God Almighty.*”

John

In the Gospel of John we remember the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. Jesus tells him that if he wanted to see the Kingdom of God, he must be born again.

After a comical conversation in which Nicodemus tries to imagine this concept literally, Jesus breaks into an answer that has become the most widely read of all verses in the bible and in so doing calls us into a vision of the Lord like Isaiah saw because it presents God to us as truthfully and yet simply as it can be,

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

It is a magnificent vision that sees God not as a beast in search of prey, but a parent in search of children.

Paul

Paul speaks more clearly about it in Romans where he speaks of the Holy Spirit testifying with our spirits that we are God’s children. You can be sure that it was when Paul was blinded to the world’s troubles by the blinding light of God’s presence on the Damascus

Road, that this revelation stole from him his vision of the world’s life as something to be obligated to in favor of divine magnificence.

In each case they were compelled. Isaiah heard a voice that said, who will go for us, whom shall I send?” He replied, “Here am I, send me.” Paul was given the life of an apostle. We are not told what Nicodemus did. Who knows what we will do?

The World’s Life

Whatever the case we must give up our attachment to the world’s life. Though still living in the world, we are not attached to it like before. There is no aspect of mundane life that is fulfilling in the end.

I found helpful a few lines from the theologian Karl Barth:

“To live after the flesh, to live the unbroken life of the world of time and things and “people,” to take that life seriously and to treat it as the real life, to live naively as though we were satisfied with the possibilities of this world, to submerge ourselves in its lowest or to revel in its highest possibilities, to commit ourselves to a conservatism which is unable to quiz itself or a revolutionary radicalism which recognizes no limitations, is henceforth for us *quite impossible.*”

We have an obligation, but it is not to live according to the flesh.

### The Obligation to the Spirit

On the contrary, our obligation is to the Spirit, to live after it. It happens that living after the Spirit is impossible for anyone caught up in the bodily life. “But those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” “The Spirit of God testifies with our spirits that we are God’s children.

After the flesh, nothing matters; after the Spirit, everything matters. No part of our life matters in itself, but everything matters when God is in it.

I like again the words of Barth, after rambling on about this encounter between the human being and God,

“In the midst of it all God has justified himself in our presence and us in his presence. The theodicy has occurred, beside which all our endeavors to justify God are merely taunting ridicule. Speaking with God’s own voice, and encircled by the glory of God’s own brightness, God has done once for all the existential deed - *God has received human beings as his children.*”

We apprehend the glory of this gospel, but it is easy to lose it in everyday things. Once again here today it is spoken forth out into a world that remains a dark and

forbidding place as well as a wonderful and enchanted place, that not because of any human achievement but because of the action of God we are God’s children. The breach is overcome, and not only are we God’s children but heirs, co-heirs with Christ of the heavenly kingdom.

This is what Isaiah was called to preach to his generation and it is also the meaning of the words, “shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Accept it, live out our lives as an obligation to it, best you can; to love, to kindness, and justice, and mercy, and sacrifice. Believe in it.

The victory is the outcome of your suffering, in the name of Christ - Amen.

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