

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Jesus' preaching continues in our Gospel today. His Sermon on the Plain began with Jesus' pronouncement of blessings and woes—blessings for those who trust in the Lord, woes to those who trust in man; blessings to those who are in Christ, Himself the poor and hungry and weeping and reviled, woes to those who look away from Christ and to material blessings now as evidence of their eternal reward; blessings to those who are baptized into Christ and bear His name, woes to those who think their good name will merit standing before the Lord. "*Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy*" Jesus says to the blessed, "*for behold, your reward is great in heaven*" (Luke 6:23).

Now, as Jesus continues His sermon, he focuses His attention on the blessed, on His followers, that is, we would say, on Christians. And He asserts that when you become a Christian, there should be an accompanying change in the way you act. Christians are people born again into the kingdom of God—given a birth from above by water and the Spirit (John 3:3, 5). They have not only been sanctified by this washing of water and the word, made "*holy and without blemish*" (Eph. 5:26-27), but they have also been regenerated and renewed by the Holy Spirit in this washing (Titus 3:5). Christians are "*baptized into Christ*" (Gal. 3:27), and therefore, are "*in Christ*" (1 Cor. 15:22).

And it's not just that "*there is no condemnation for [us] who are in Christ Jesus*" (Rom. 8:1); it's not just that "*in Christ shall all be made alive*" (1 Cor. 15:22), that is, that there will be a future reward in heaven; it's that we have been made new as St. Paul says. Indeed, "*if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself*" (2 Cor. 5:17-18).

Truly, being "*in Christ*" and having that eternal hope should signal something now. It should signal a change in our lives, away from a focus on self to a focus on others, away from an attitude of "*Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die,*" to an attitude of "*as [we] wish that others would do to [us], do so to them,*" away from lives filled with "*sinning*" to lives that seek to live righteously. It's the "*love of Christ*" that impels us to this attitude, as St. Paul says, "***The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised***" (2 Cor. 5:14-15).

And where did you die? In the sacrament that united you with Christ, that made you His own: in your baptism. "*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried*

therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3-4). There’s the expectation: that we might walk in newness of life, not according to the old sinful ways, not for ourselves, but for Christ, the crucified and risen One, and for others as we are empowered by Him.

Indeed, St. Paul goes on to say it: “*We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin*” (Rom. 6:6). Again, “*Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do **not** present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and **your members to God as instruments for righteousness***” (Rom. 6:13).

Now, I think we would agree with all that. The kids at school didn’t all agree, at first, but I think they came around. I think we would all agree: it seems **reasonable** in the abstract. As Christians, we should try not to sin, but to live righteous lives. And we think, “Yeah, I can do that!”

But where Paul is abstract, Jesus is not. And as the saying goes, “the devil is in the details.” Indeed, what does it mean to live the life of a Christian? What does it mean to live for Christ? What does it mean to live for righteousness?

Jesus tells us: “*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*” He says, “*Offer the other [cheek]*” to the one who strikes you. He says, “*Give your undergarment to the one who takes your cloak.*” He says, “*Give to everyone that begs.*” He says, “*Don’t try to recover, if someone takes something from you!*” The “Golden Rule” that Jesus quotes — “*as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them*” — seems rather tame compared to that.

Indeed, what do you think? Is that reasonable? Most would say not, but as Christians we’d say these concrete actions that Jesus sets forth are beyond human reason, but they’re not unreasonable. For us mere mortals, though, they are radical.

They’re certainly not the ways of the street. The street’s rules we deal with all the time at school. We say they’re unacceptable, but parents teach them. “*Love your enemy*”? Ridiculous! “*Destroy him,*” kids are taught. “*Do good to someone who hates you*”? No way! “*Hate him back, and do whatever you can to hurt him.*” “*Bless the one who curses you or maybe insults your family*”? “*Those are fighting words.*” And what is this about “*turning the other cheek*”? “*I’m telling you, if someone hits you, you hit them back and harder. Girls or boys, it doesn’t matter. Don’t back down from a fight.*” And sadly, on the street these days, it escalates

into “shoot ’em.” Most of this actually sounds reasonable to us, and Christ’s teaching ... well, radical!

But Jesus doesn’t back down from this Christian calling. He doubles down on the distinction between Christians and ordinary sinners. Christians don’t just love those who will love you back as sinners do. Christians don’t just do good to those who will reciprocate. Christians don’t just lend to those who will pay it back.

That’s not to say that Christians aren’t sinners. Indeed, even if we do these things that Christ commands, we surely do them grudgingly. They are tainted with sin. Trusting in Christ, of course, our good works are perfect, but from a human point of view, even these “*righteous deeds*” are “*unclean*,” “*a polluted garment*” (Is. 64:6).

Truly, Christians on earth are still sinners, but the forgiveness that Christ earned by His cross has been applied to Christians. They have received mercy; they have been forgiven. Therefore, they are to act accordingly, with mercy and forgiveness to others. “*Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*” Love, do good, lend...selflessly, not expecting to receive something in return—not love, not thanks, not repayment, because that’s what God in Christ did for them. As Jesus told the disciples, “*You received without paying; give without pay*” (Matt. 10:8). That, too, is radical!

And although earlier, I held out the possibility that such love could be expressed by us in the abstract, I have to say that I don’t think I know anyone who does it. Indeed, I suggest that we all fail miserably at doing what Christ here describes as the Christian way. We don’t do it perfectly because we are not the sinless Christ. That doesn’t relieve us from trying; but we fail, and so we call out for mercy to the One who Himself expressed this kind of law-keeping. Yes, Christ is the One who loved us, born according to the flesh as His enemies, sinners with minds “*hostile to God*” (Rom. 8:7), and yet, “*while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son*,” and more than that, “*now that we are reconciled, ... we [shall] be saved by his life*” (Rom. 5:10). Again St. Paul says, “*God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us*” (Rom. 5:8). And St. John says, “*This is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins*” (1 John 4:10).

Jesus did the ultimate good on the cross, and not just for believers, but for the world, for those who would hate Him, for those who would sin against Him, falsely accusing Him, though He committed no sin, for those who would lie about Him, though no “*deceit [was] found in his mouth*,” for those who would mock and curse and revile Him, though He would “*not revile in return.*” Jesus gave His cheek to those who would strike Him, and He did not strike back. He suffered and

“*did not threaten*” in return (1 Pet. 2:23). He was cursed as He was hanged upon the tree (Gal. 3:13), and He did not curse in return, but blessed: “*Father, forgive them*” (Luke 23:34).

As Peter says, “*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, [so] that we might die to sin and live to righteousness*” (1 Pet. 2:24). The cross is God’s own expression of this radical love that Christ preaches in His sermon, and although we as Christ’s disciples are not called to mount a cross to manifest this same love, we are called to something like it, namely to lose our lives for the sake of Jesus and His Gospel (Mark 8:35). We are called to be merciful, not judgmental, to be forgiving and giving, not condemning, to do good and not evil, to love and not hate — everyone — a radical love.

Jesus preached His sermon today to those who would hear. I call on you also to listen to Jesus and not to the world. The world sounds reasonable; Jesus sounds radical—discipleship sounds radical. And it is, but Jesus knows your flesh; He knows your weakness; He knows you will fail. And so, Jesus also calls on you to listen to those whom He places in your midst to speak His words. He calls you ever to repent and to listen to His words of absolution from your pastor’s mouth: “You are forgiven by the blood of Jesus.” Believe this radical love. Taste it today in His body and blood given and shed for you. Then go forth, loving, helping, blessing, and praying for all people. May the mercy and forgiveness of Christ flow through our ears and mouths into our hearts; then out of our mouths into the world.

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.