

Fifth Sunday in Lent;

John 8:46-59

Christ's Defense Against His Enemies

Which of you convinceth me of sin? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me? He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God. Then answered the Jews, and said unto him, Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil? Jesus answered, I have not a devil; but I honour my Father, and ye do dishonour me. And I seek not mine own glory: there is one that seeketh and judgeth. Verily, verily, I say unto you, If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death. Then said the Jews unto him, Now we know that thou hast a devil. Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and thou sayest, If a man keep my saying, he shall never taste of death. Art thou greater than our father Abraham, which is dead? and the prophets are dead: whom makest thou thyself? Jesus answered, If I honour myself, my honour is nothing: it is my Father that honoureth me; of whom ye say, that he is your God: Yet ye have not known him; but I know him: and if I should say, I know him not, I shall be a liar like unto you: but I know him, and keep his saying. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad. Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am. Then took they up stones to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.

1. This Gospel teaches how hardened persons become the more furious, the more one teaches them and lovingly stirs them to do their duty. For Christ asks them here in a very loving way for a reason why they still disbelieve, since they can find fault neither with his life nor with his teaching. His life is blameless; for he defies them and says: "*Which of you convicteth me of sin?*" His teaching also is blameless; for he adds: "If I say truth, why do ye not believe me?" Thus Christ lives, as he teaches.

2. And every preacher should prove that he possesses both: first, a blameless life, by which he can defy his enemies and no one may have occasion to slander his teachings; secondly, that he possesses the pure doctrine, so that he may not mislead those who follow him. And

thus he will be right and firm on both sides: with his good life against his enemies, who look much more at his life than at his doctrine, and despise the doctrine for the sake of the life; with his doctrine among his friends, who have much more respect for his doctrine than for the kind of life he leads, and will bear with his life for the sake of his teaching.

3. For it is indeed true that no one lives so perfect a life as to be without sin before God. Therefore it is sufficient that he be blameless in the eyes of the people. But his doctrine must be so good and pure as to stand not only before man but also before God. Therefore every pious pastor may well ask: Who among you can find fault with my life? Among you, I say, who are men; but before God I am a sinner. Thus Moses also boasts in Numbers 16, 15. that he took nothing from the people and he did them no injustice. Samuel did likewise in I Sam 12, 3, also Jeremiah and Hezekiah, who rightly boasted of their blameless life before the people, in order to stop the mouths of blasphemers. But Christ does not speak thus of his doctrine, he says not: "*Who among you can find fault with my doctrine*"; but "*If I tell you the truth.*" For one must be assured that his doctrine is right before God and that it is the truth, and accordingly care not how it is judged by the people.

4. Hence the Jews have no ground for their unbelief than that they are not the children of God; therefore he passes judgment upon them and says: "He that is of God heareth the words of God; for this cause ye hear them not, because ye are not of God," that cannot mean anything else than that you are of the devil.

5. The Jews could not stand this, for they wished to be God's children and people; therefore they are now raging and slander both Christ's life and his doctrine; his doctrine, in that they say: "Thou hast a devil," that is, thou speakest moved by the devil and thy doctrine is his lie; and they slander his life, in that they say, "Thou art a Samaritan," which sounds among the Jews worse than any other crime. In this way Christ teaches us here the fate that awaits us Christians and his Word; both our life and our doctrine must be condemned and reviled, and that by the foremost, wisest and greatest of earth. Thus one knows the corrupt tree by its fruits, as they, under the pretense of being good, are so bitter, angry, impatient, cruel and mad as to condemn and pass sentence, when one touches them at their tender spot and rejects their ideas and ways.

6. What does Christ do here? His life he abandons to shame and dishonor, is silent and suffers them to call him a Samaritan; while he takes pains to defend his doctrine. For the doctrine is not ours, but God's, and God dare not suffer in the least, here patience is at an end; but I should stake all that I have and suffer, all that they do, in order that the honor of God and of his Word may not be injured. For if I perish, no great harm is done; but if I let God's Word perish, and I remain silent, then I do harm to God and to the whole world. Although I can not now close their mouth nor prevent their wickedness, I shall nevertheless not keep silent, nor act as if they are right, as I do about my good life, so that they retain their right. Although they do me injustice at the time, yet it remains right before God. Further, Christ excuses himself, and says: "I have not a demon," that is, my doctrine is not of the devil's lies; "*but I honor my father,*" that is, I preach in my doctrine the grace

of God, through which he is to be praised, loved and honored by believers. For the evangelical office of the ministry is nothing but glorifying God, Ps 19, 2: *"The heavens declare the glory of God"* etc. *"But you dishonor me,"* that is, you call me the devil's liar, who reviles and dishonors God.

7. Why does he not say: I honor my father, and ye dishonor him; but says: *"Ye dishonor me?"* Impliedly he proves by this, that the father's and his honor are alike and the same, as he and the Father are one God; yet along with this he also wishes to teach that if the office of the ministry, which God honors, is to be duly praised, then it must suffer disgrace. In like manner we will also do to our princes and priests; when they attack our manner of life, we should suffer it and show love for hatred, good for evil; but when they attack our doctrine, God's honor is attacked, then love and patience should cease and we should not keep silent, but also say: I honor my Father, and you dishonor me; yet I do not inquire whether you dishonor me, for I do not seek my own honor. But nevertheless, be on your guard, there is one who seeks it and judges, that is, the Father will require it of you, and judge you and never let you go unpunished. He seeks not only his honor, but also mine, because I seek his honor, as he says in 1 Sam 2, 30: *"Them that honor me I will honor."* And it is our consolation that we are happy; although the whole world reviles and dishonors us, we are assured that God will advance our honor, and therefore will punish, judge and revenge. If one could only believe it and persevere, he will surely come. *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, if a man keep my word, he shall never see death."*

8. By these words he spoils it entirely, in that he does not only defend his doctrine as right and good, which they attribute to the devil; but also ascribes such virtue to his teaching that it becomes a powerful emperor over Satan, death and sin, to give and sustain eternal life. Behold here, how divine wisdom and human reason conflict with one another. How can a human being grasp the thought, that a corporeal, an oral word should redeem forever from death? But let blindness run its course; we shall consider this beautiful saying. Christ is speaking here not of the word of the law, but of the Gospel, which is a discourse about Christ, who died for our sins etc. For God did not wish to impart Christ to the world in any other way; he had to embody him in the Word and thus distribute him, and present him to everybody; otherwise Christ would have existed for himself alone and remained unknown to us; he would have thus died for himself. But since the Word places before us Christ, it thus places us before him who has triumphed over death, sin and Satan. Therefore he who grasps and retains Christ, has thus also eternal deliverance from death. Consequently it is a Word of life, and it is true, that whoever keeps the Word shall never see death.

9. And from this we may well understand what Christ meant by the word *"keep;"* it does not refer to such keeping as one keeps the law by good works; for this word of Christ must be kept in the heart by faith and not with the fist or by good works, as the Jews in this case understand it; they fearfully rage against Christ, that Abraham and the prophets are dead; they know nothing of what it is *"to keep," "to die" or "to live."* And it is not called *"to keep"* in vain; for there is a conflict and battle when sin bites, death presses and hell faces

us; then we are to be in earnest in holding firmly to the Word and let nothing separate us from it. Thus see now how Christ answers the Jews and praises his own teachings. You say, my Word is of the devil and wish to sink it to the bottom of perdition; on the contrary I say to you that it has divine power in it, and I exalt it higher than the heaven of heavens, and above all creatures.

10. How does it then come to pass that man does not see nor taste death, and yet Abraham and all the prophets are dead, who notwithstanding had the Word of God as the Jews say? Here we must give attention to the words of Christ, who makes the distinction that death is a different thing than to see or taste death. We all must face death and die; but a Christian neither tastes nor sees it, that is, he does not feel it, he is not terrified before it, and he enters death calmly and quietly, as though falling asleep, and yet he does not die. But a godless person feels and experiences death, and is terrified before it forever. Thus to taste death may well be called the power and reign or the bitterness of death, yea, it is the eternal death and hell. The Word of God makes this difference. A Christian has that Word and clings firmly to it in death; therefore he does not see death, but his eyes are filled with the life and the Christ in that Word; therefore he never feels death. But the godless possess not that Word, therefore they see no life, but only death; and they must also feel death; that is then the bitter and eternal death.

11. Now Christ means here that whoever clings to his Word will in the midst of death neither feel nor see death, as he also says in Jn 11, 25: *"I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me though he die, yet shall he live,"* that is, he will not experience real death. Here we see now what a glorious estate it is to be a Christian, who is already released from death forever and can never die. For his death or dying seems outwardly indeed like the dying of the godless, but inwardly there is a difference as great as between heaven and earth. For the Christian sleeps in death and in that way enters into life, but the godless departs from life and experiences death forever; thus we may see how some tremble, doubt and despair, and become senseless and raging in the midst of the perils of death. Hence death is also called in the Scriptures a sleep. For just as he who falls asleep does not know how it happens, and he greets the morning when he awakes; so shall we suddenly arise on the last day, and never know how we entered and passed through death.

12. Let us take another example. When Israel marched out of Egypt and came to the Red Sea, they were free and experienced no death, but only life. However when King Pharaoh arrived behind them with all his forces, then they stood in the midst of death, then no life was in sight. For before them was the sea, through which they could not pass, behind them King Pharaoh, and on both sides of them high mountains; on all sides they were seized and enclosed by death, so that they said to Moses: "Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness?" Ex 14, 11, so completely and wholly did they despair of life. Just then Moses came and brought them God's Word that comforted them in the midst of death and preserved them alive, when he said in verse

13: *"Fear not, stand still, and see the salvation of Jehovah, which he will work for you today: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen today, ye shall see them again no more for ever."* They clung to this Word and held out until victory came; through it life appeared in the presence of death, because they believed the Word, that it would come to pass, and relying upon it they marched into the midst of the Red Sea, which stood on both sides of them like two walls. Then it came to pass that nothing but life and safety were in the sea, where before there were only death and danger. For they would have never become so bold as to go into the sea, had it divided a hundred times, if God's Word had not been present, which comforted them and promised life. Thus man triumphs over death through the Word of Life, if he cleaves to it and believes, and marches into death with it.

13. Likewise Christ also says here in replying to the Jews, that Abraham and the prophets still live and they never died, but have life in the midst of death; they however only lie and sleep in death. For "Abraham," he says, "rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad." Thus, the prophets also saw it. Where and when did Abraham see it? Not with his bodily eyes, as the Jews interpret it, but with the sight of faith in the heart; that is, he recognized Christ when he was told in Gen 22,18: *"In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed."* Then he saw and understood that Christ, born of his seed through a pure virgin, so as not to be cursed with Adam's children but to remain blessed, should suffer for the whole world, cause this to be preached, and thus overwhelm the whole world with blessing etc. This is the day of Christ, the dispensation of the Gospel, that is the light of this day, which radiates from Christ as from the sun of righteousness, and shines and enlightens the whole world. This is a spiritual day, yet it arose at the time Christ was on the earth in the flesh, a day like Abraham saw. But the Jews understood nothing about such a day because of their carnal minds, and hence they reviled Christ as a liar.

14. Therefore Christ proceeds farther and gives the ground and reason why it is just his Word and not the word of anyone else, that giveth life, and says it is because he was before Abraham, or in other words, because he was the one true God. For if the person who offered himself as a sacrifice for us were not God, it would not help or avail anything, even if he were born of the Virgin Mary and suffered a thousand deaths. But the fact that the Seed of Abraham, who gave himself for us, is also true God, secures blessing and victory for all sinners. Therefore Christ speaks not of his human nature that they saw and experienced; for they could easily see he was not yet fifty years of age, and did not live before Abraham. But with that nature by which he existed long before the time of Abraham, by which he existed also before all creatures and before the whole world. Just as he was man according to his spiritual nature before Abraham, that is, in his Word and in the knowledge of faith was he in the saints; for they all knew and believed that Christ, as God and man, should suffer for us, as is written in Heb 13, 8: *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yea and for ever;"* and in the Revelation of John, 13,8: *"The Lamb of God that hath been slain from the foundation of the world."* Yet now he is speaking here especially of his divine nature.

15. But here reason is terribly offended and becomes mad and furious because God should become man; this reason cannot harmonize and understand. And this is the article of faith to which the Jews still in our day can not reconcile themselves, hence they cannot cease their throwing stones and their blasphemy. But Christ also continues on the other hand to hide himself from them and to go out of their temple, so that they cannot see nor find him in the Scriptures, in which they search daily. Again, this narrative is not a little terror to all who are so foolhardy about the Scriptures and never approach them with a humble spirit. For even in our day it happens that many read and study in the Scriptures and yet they cannot find Christ, he is hid and has gone out of the temple. And how many there are who say with their mouth that God is become man, and yet they are without the Spirit in their hearts; who whenever tested, prove that they were never in real earnest. This is sufficient on this subject.

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