

Sunday, July 14, 2024 **Philippians 4:8,9**

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the Lord of peace will be with you.”

“Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will—all that I have and possess. You, Lord, have given all to me. I now give it back to you, O Lord. All of it is yours. Dispose of it according to your will. Give me love of yourself along with your grace, for that is enough for me.”

The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, translated George E. Ganss, SJ
(St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992) No. 234
Quoted by Howard Gray, SJ in “Ignatian Spirituality,” p. 62.

“The best Jesuit missionaries asked not, ‘Can we bring God to you?’ but rather, ‘Where in your culture, in your profession, in your occupation, in your religious experience, in your life, does God already exist and act?’ Reconciliation is an a priori desire to find how God dwells even in adversaries and to seek to make them friends or, at least, mutually respectful members of a dialogue.”

Howard Gray, SJ, in “Ignatian Spirituality,” p. 73.

“Another way of making the same point is to say that God is always in conscious relationship with each one of us as our creator, our sustainer, dear father or dear mother, our brother, our savior, the Spirit who dwells in our hearts. Ignatius presupposes that at every moment of our existence God is communicating to us who God is, is trying to draw us into an awareness, a consciousness of the reality of who we are in God’s sight. Whether we are aware of it or not, at every moment of our existence we are encountering God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is trying to catch our attention, trying to draw us into a reciprocal conscious relationship.”

William A. Barry, SJ, in “What are Spiritual Exercises?,” p.123.

The three quotations following Philippians 4:8,9 are taken from An Ignatian Spirituality Reader, ed. George W. Traub, SJ. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008).

How can we live at peace with God, and with our neighbor, and with ourselves? Paul is urging the Christians at Philippi to choose what is good. The list includes that which is pleasing and has honor and value.

Introduction

The interpretation of this Scripture that I am working with today, is that we are told to look for what God is doing in all the circumstances of our lives. The Bible does not teach that everything is good in and around us, but through the revelation of Scripture, we learn that God is good and is working good. This is the basic attitude toward life that guides us. God is working through all things. We do not call all things good. But good is working through all things.

This keeps us from making excuses about what is not good, from losing hope or becoming cynical, from giving up and just letting things be as they are without a sense of purpose. This keeps us from labeling events and people “good” or “bad.” Thus, we call the terrible day Christ was executed on the cross, Good Friday. It is the purpose of God we call good in all things.

By faith we believe that God is good and has a purpose for the world and our lives.

Look for what God is doing and follow that thread in our lives, in our congregation, in our society, in our world. We all want to hear the Word of God and obey it directly, but the Scriptures tell us that it is work to listen, to accept, to believe, to watch for God in all things.

John Calvin does not comment on the verses of our text in Institutes of the Christian Religion, but on the verses around them. (Book 3, Chapter 20, section 40) On Phil 4:6, he writes that Paul is teaching us to pray properly by telling us of God’s care for us. Calvin points out that people who are not sure that God is looking out for them are always trying to start their prayers over. “From this it is clear that those who do not feel assured that “God’s eye is upon the righteous’ [Ps. 34:15; cf. I Peter 3:12] in doubt and perplexity turn ever their prayers within their minds.” (Vol. 2, p 903) If we know that God is watching over us and are watching for all that God is working good, then we are at peace and do not have to constantly start over from scratch.

The work of a Christian is to find what God is doing in their life and circumstances.

John Calvin taught and preached through most parts of the Bible, but he also was burdened to help Christians see the big picture, to order their lives around what God had created, to choose the important things. Calvin kept rewriting and reorganizing that “big picture” teaching throughout his life, The Institutes of the Christian Religion. Here are the subtitles of the Four Books: “The Knowledge of God the Creator,” “The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, First Disclosed to the Fathers under the Law, and then to us in the Gospel,” “The Way in Which we Receive the Grace of Christ” What benefits come to us from it , and what effects follow,” and “The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds us Therein.” “Sola Scriptura” was the basis of the Reformers’ faith, but each of them left copious writings to interpret God’s Word. We, too, struggle to have a big picture of what God is doing, and we must do so, bringing Scripture to our lives.

God became human. The divine taking on flesh we call incarnation. Although we are not divine, by believing in Jesus, we also incarnate, make the message flesh.

Verse 9 tells us to make “the teaching, tradition, the spoken word, and the living example” (Martin p 159) The person who is teaching is part of the example. So it is for you and for me. But not that the person teaching is to be revered, but to look for the good and true in their lives and words. Again, there is challenging work here for those who believe God’s Word, not passive obedience. This work is related to our lives in bodies on earth, our circumstances and the memories we carry with us. Within all that, what we call incarnation, God lives with human life, within the world as it is, not as it should be.

History is full of great preachers and leaders who were miserable and unpleasant to be around personally. John Knox, the Scottish reformer, on his death bed, couldn’t wait to “exchange this mortal and miserable life for a blessed immortality through Jesus Christ,” and he was so cranky everyone else may have been happy for him to go, too. We are all odd and off balance in some way, and God works through us, but the closer we are to a community of faith, we learn how to live in a way that releases us from striving to be liked rather than resting in Christ.

Concluding admonition.

Find whatever is most helpful and fruitful. Let us train ourselves to recognize what is of God and what is not. We order our lives for the purpose of being free to serve God and our neighbor, to do what we cannot do without learning to trust and obey God within our bodies and lives. Although we will not understand life in general or the specifics of our lives, we can be at peace, seeing that God is working good in all things.

References

Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion. John T. Mitchell, ed. , Ford Lewis Battles, Translator and Indexer. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press,1960, Paperback, 2011) Vol. 1, p. 595 on Loyola’s Exercises. Vol. 2, p. 903 on Philippians 4:6.

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