

## A Sermon for Septuagesima, February 8, 2009

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Some people complain that Southern California lacks the change of seasons. Being a sacramental Christian provides compensation. The church calendar provides what the climate lacks. Today is the beginning of a new season, with a new liturgical color, mood and orientation. The seasons we just finished—Advent, Christmas and Epiphany—were about the Incarnation. Advent prepared for it. Christmas proclaimed it. And Epiphany revealed it to us.

Today we stop looking backward at Christmas and begin looking forward to the Resurrection and the cross that precedes it. Septuagesima means “seventieth day.” It refers to the number of days before Easter. Today is actually sixty-four days before Easter. The church moved the observances of the seventieth, sixtieth and fiftieth days before Easter to three Sundays before Lent. We will be accurate by Quinquagesima, which is actually fifty days before Easter.

In the purple seasons of pre-Lent and Lent, the joy of Incarnation and revelation give way to realization that trial, suffering and death must take place before Incarnation leads to Resurrection. The church, in her wisdom, gives us a season of transition. In the three Sundays of pre-Lent the mood and color change and the march towards Easter begins, but the fast is not yet here.

The lessons for Septuagesima capture a great paradox of the Christian life. Salvation is free, but it is not easy. Salvation is a gift, but we must work hard at it. There is often a measure of tension between different aspects of truth. The tension is not conflict. Rather, it puts each aspect of truth in its proper perspective.

The gospel (The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, Matthew 20:1f.) teaches that salvation cannot be earned. The wage represents salvation. All received the same wage no matter how long they worked because all who put their faith in Jesus will be saved no matter how long they follow him. In business, the all day workers would have a legitimate labor grievance but not in the kingdom, for salvation isn't a wage; it is a gift. Our salvation does not fit into a story about labor.

But then we come to our epistle (1 Corinthians 9:24f.) and discover that St. Paul worked very hard, and we must work hard also. Many run, but only one wins. Therefore, we must strive and be temperate and disciplined, lest we fall short of the goal.

So which is it? Is salvation a gift so that all I have to do is believe in Jesus? Or must I train hard in order to win the prize? Is salvation free? Or must I work for it? The answer to both questions is, “Yes.” We can understand these two truths by looking at the errors that result when we focus only on one of them. On the one hand, if I believe that salvation is free *and* easy I will be unprepared for the temptations I will face. I will be in danger of having the kind of faith, described in the Parable of the Sower and the Seed (Luke 8:4f.), that sprouts quickly but is withered and choked by trials. On the other hand, if I believe that salvation results from my own efforts and is not a gift, I am likely to misunderstand God's grace. I will think that salvation is about what I do rather than what God has done. And I may become either prideful about my religious practice or frustrated once I realize how inadequate my own efforts are.

The truth is that salvation is a gift that requires work. There is nothing I can do to be saved, for I am

a fallen creature, incapable of imitating the Son of God by my own moral effort. Salvation begins with the recognition that Jesus has done what I cannot do, and that I must receive his gift of forgiveness and eternal life with repentance and faith.

However, having received the gift, I must now go back to work; but not the old kind of work—merely trying hard to be good or religious. It is a new kind of work. It involves adopting disciplines and habits of life that allow the Holy Spirit to do God’s work in me. The work of the Christian life involves opening our hearts and minds to receive the gift of God’s grace.

The work of the Christian life takes place on the supernatural level. The gift of the Spirit enables us to do by grace what we cannot do by nature. The Holy Spirit enables us to rise above our natural limitations and do the will of God. The disciplines of the Christian life, such as prayer, fasting and almsgiving, help us to live life “in the Spirit.”

Spiritual disciplines require effort, but they do not earn salvation. We pray in order to open our lives up to the presence of God. We practice fasting, we moderate our appetites, because this is a tool by which the Spirit subdues the flesh. We give to orient our treasure and thus our hearts towards God. But we are way off track if we think that God accepts us because we do these things.

Failure is part of the work of faith. As our faith is tested, it sometimes fails. Failure is not disaster in the life of prayer—unless it causes us to give up. Failure is part of the process of growth into the image of Christ. When we fail, we discover that we haven’t grown as much as we thought. We are like a student whose low grade on a test lets him know where he needs to improve; or an infant who is trying to walk, but is still falling down; or an athlete who is unable to perform at the desired level because he has not yet developed sufficient strength or skill.

Spiritual disciplines are the way we develop spiritual strength. They are the way we consistently bring ourselves into the presence of God so as to consistently receive his grace. Without a disciplined life of prayer, there will be no growth and more failure, just as the student who does not study will not improve his test score; just as the infant who does not try again will never walk; just as the athlete who does not train will never get better. Yet all this work is rooted in grace. For the very fact that we are living “in Christ” is a gift.

We return to the altar of God to be renewed by grace. If there is one thing the liturgy teaches us, it is that we are saved by grace, by the cross of Jesus, and not by what we do. Yet as we are continually renewed by grace, there is also progress. New strength is developed; new virtues begin to take root. And we are sent back out, again, to “do all such good works as [God] has prepared for us...”

We begin the pilgrimage to Easter through the cross by remembering the paradox of grace and labor that is at the heart of our faith. As Philippians says, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” (2:12-13).

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