

Title: “Doubts and Assurances”

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Luke 13:22-30

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Overview:

GPS may fail and may surprise us in our travels, but the Word of God will never fail us; Christ will never fail us. Just as Martin Luther clung to Word and Sacrament, we too are called to do the same.

Lesson:

Our confidence in our election can only be found at the foot of the cross.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Before this internet fad when I needed to go someplace new, I would find a map in the phone book and plot my course. I would lay the map out on the kitchen table, grab a blank sheet of paper, and then draw out my path with enough detail to instill the necessary confidence that I would make it to where I was going. And as long as there were no mistakes in my drawing, I had great success.

Then came GPS and the apps that went along with them. Instead of being responsible for the *entire* journey I was now responsible for listening and following prompts. Even better, unexpected obstacles or delays could be dealt with dynamically as they presented themselves on the trip. I had no need to plot my entire journey but could instead just know my destination and trust that my guide would lead me there. I might travel through well-worn highways, or I might be redirected through less-traveled trails and dirt roads, but my electronic guide would ensure that I would arrive at my expected destination.

Now, you might be tempted to tune me out because you know where this is going: “Yes, yes, Chris. I know. Let the Holy Spirit be your guide. Let him prompt and redirect you to your final destination.” If that’s what you were thinking, then keep listening because it’s not my message.

Let me go back to the GPS example again. How many of you have entered an address, had Google or Apple map it out for you, and then lead you to.... Somewhere else? Have you ever found the device stating that “you have arrived at your destination” only to look up and see that you are not even close to where you expected to be? This has happened to me several times and although the accuracy is improving, I still don’t trust the device enough to turn my

mind off and blindly follow the instructions. Instead I always have that little worry in the back of my mind that I will be surprised after my last turn.

And it seems that today's Gospel reading provides the same uncertainty for us. Jesus is asked how many will be saved but the question that they are really asking is if *they* will be saved. They are looking for certainty and asking Jesus to provide it. But his reply is unexpected. He says:

“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. ²⁵Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’

“But he will answer, ‘I don't know you or where you come from.’

²⁶“Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’

²⁷“But he will reply, ‘I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!’

²⁸“There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, ...”

This passage can be very unnerving and troubling to a believer. It can keep him or her awake at night or, even worse, prompt them to doubt in the Good News of Jesus Christ that they have come to believe in. They can begin to wonder if maybe, just maybe there is more that ought to be done than to simply believe in Him. They may tell themselves that clearly this passage teaches that simply eating and drinking with Christ may not be enough. They may begin to add to their foundational belief of grace alone *with works*. They may work harder to please God, give more, serve more, smile more. Anything to contribute to the work that Jesus has already done, all because Jesus just might not be enough, and it will be too late when they find out.

And the burden of this uncertainty may continue to weigh on them and become heavier and heavier with each passing day. They may look for solace in God's Word but find that it only adds to their confusion. And as the weight of this doubt grows ever heavier, they may discover that they cannot carry it any longer and will cast it aside, along with their belief in God and Jesus and the promise of salvation. And then, they truly will be lost, just as they feared.

<PAUSE>

The reality of this scenario is that he is not the only one with these doubts. Many of us have had them; maybe all of us have had them. I know that I have, and I still do at times. I question how the work of Jesus can really be enough to cover *my* sins. I question if the love of Jesus can really be enough to want to cover my sins.

You see:

This Christian is not the only one with doubts.
And I'm not the only one with doubts.
And we are not the only one with doubts.

Martin Luther, too, had doubts; terrible ones at that. Historian David Steinmetz describes the terror which Luther experienced at these times as a fear that "God had turned his back on him once and for all," abandoning him "to suffer the pains of hell." Feeling "alone in the universe," Luther "doubted his own faith, his own mission, and the goodness of God—doubts which, because they verged on blasphemy, drove him deeper and deeper" into despair. His prayers met a "wall of indifferent silence." He experienced heart palpitations, crying spells and profuse sweating. He was convinced that he would die soon and go straight to hell.

He was driven deeper and deeper into despair but instead of turning away from God like the fictitious character, Luther turned *towards* Him. He dove *back* into Scripture and to the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. He turned to the church. He is quoted as saying that: "No one should be alone when he opposes Satan. The church and the ministry of the Word were instituted for this purpose, that hands may be joined together, and one may help another. If the prayer of one doesn't help, the prayer of another will."

Luther clung to the Word with all of his strength during these dark times. He refused to let it go because he knew that doing so would lead him to the wrong destination. And through the Word, and through the Sacraments, and through the prayers of others he found peace.

In a sermon that he authored on preparing to die he wrote:

Grace and mercy are there where Christ on the cross takes your sin from you, bears it for you, and destroys it. To believe this firmly, to keep it before your eyes and not to doubt it, means to view the picture of Christ and to engrave it in yourself... In this way you may view your sins in safety without tormenting your conscience. Here sins are never sins, for here they are overcome and swallowed up in Christ. He takes your death upon himself and strangles it so that it may not harm you...

You see, once Luther found his way to the cross, he knew that he had found his way to heaven. He knew that on the day when he would find himself knocking at that narrow door, God would open it up and warmly welcome him. He knew that there would be no surprises and this assurance brought him the confidence and the peace that he then shared with others.

This is the same with us. Because the Holy Spirit is alive in each of us, He leads us to the cross - the same one that Luther set his GPS to. And just like him, we believe that our sins, and our death have been placed on Jesus and that we can confidently stand before the door and knock - and that we will be invited in.

And there can be nothing more assuring, more peaceful, or more comforting than that.

Let us pray. As we pray, I'd like to borrow some of the words and thoughts from Martin's sermon.

Lord, we come to you at the cross for it is there where you meet us. We bring nothing but our fears and our uncertainty. But as we stand, we look up and gaze at you, who descended into hell for our sake and was forsaken by God as one eternally damned when you spoke the words on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And in that moment our hell was defeated, and our election was made sure. Lord I ask you to give me the strength to cling to this picture, to keep it in the forefront of my mind always, and to believe that it was done for me. I pray that you constantly guide me to seek you and only you for my salvation. All of this in your name we pray. Amen.