

Title: “An Open Book”

Chris Ryan

Deut. 4:6-8, Mark 7:20-21

8/29/2021

Service Readings: Deut. 4:1-2, 6-9; Eph 6:10-20; Mark 7:14-23

Keep the commands of God, this passage teaches. But it is more than adhering to God's law. 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' Wise and understanding. That is what the world is to say about Christ's church – wise and understanding. They are to see us as we truly are. They are to know that we are a sinful creature but that through faith we cling to the promise of forgiveness and the hope of everlasting life. They are to see that we are a merciful body – slow to anger and abounding in love.

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.

“Ask me anything; I am an open book.” This reflects an attitude usually reserved for close friends and family. An invitation usually offered as evidence of deep trust between two people. It is an invitation that implies no area of the person's life off limits, no thoughts or past deeds too private to withhold. It says to the hearer that the mask has been set aside, the walls have been torn down, and the innermost corners of the heart lay exposed and unprotected. At least that's what it *supposed* to mean, but all too often the “open book” of the person's life is greatly sifted and even censored; the deepest secrets redacted and removed from its pages. The book becomes an autobiography where the description of the true self has been filtered through the lenses of societal expectations to ensure that the darkest corners remain unexposed.

Simply put, there are just things that we don't talk about to each other. There are things about us that we don't want others to learn. And these “things” don't have to be evil by society's standards – they don't have to be about sexual immorality, theft, or murder. No, they can be more mundane by the same set of standards: deceit, pride, and foolishness. The world may laugh that these fill the darkest corners of your heart but for Jesus and his church they all bear equal culpability. In our gospel passage Jesus says:

²⁰ And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

He lists pride and foolishness alongside theft and murder. He doesn't differentiate them in any way because the point he is making is *not* about the degree of sin but about the *heart* of the sinner. He's teaching that it is the heart of man that is corrupt and out of it flows corruption. The blood that flows from it feeds evil thoughts and evil deeds. And as it flows from the heart through the body – to the mind which produces these thoughts, and to the hands which performs these evil deeds, the body is defiled and poisoned. Make no mistake, the message of Jesus in this passage is one of

condemnation. There is no excuse for what flows from our within. We can make no excuse for our thoughts and our actions. We have no solid ground in which to claim that the world made us do it, or that we had no other choice but sin. He tells us that evil may have been seeded in our hearts by the fallen world, but it has been nurtured and raised by our own volition. It may have been watered by the schemes and lies of the devil, but he can take no claim over our mind or our actions.

It is no wonder Paul writes that we must “put on the whole armor of God,” for what else do we have as protection than Jesus from these evil forces and from *even ourselves*? Lead us not into temptation. This is what he teaches us to pray. Protect us from ourselves and from the devil because left to our own desires, we chose flesh instead of Christ.

But, as John says in his gospel: “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:17).” The perfect, innocent blood of Jesus that was shed on the cross becomes our blood through baptism and flows through our hearts. Our minds, once desiring the things of the flesh, now desire the things of God. Our hands, once used for earthly gain, are now used for God’s glory. We are still sinners with evil thoughts and desires, but we live in the knowledge of Christ’s forgiveness and live with the desire to please him.

Grafted into the body of Christ we become members of a new nation, God’s chosen people. We are added to his church, and we live a life pleasing to God. A life that produces the fruit of love and joy and peace. A life that is characterized by love in service to one another. We have many examples of this, right here at St. Mark. Our prayer chain, the community lunches, and outreach, just to name a few. We intercede for each other through prayer and we support and encourage each other through works. And we do the same for the world – praying and serving, shining the light of Jesus before men.

But back to the open book of your life, how are we to act as imitators of Christ? Deuteronomy paints a picture from the world’s point of view – a world that has rejected him.

⁶ Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ ⁷ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? ⁸ And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

Keep the commands of God, this passage teaches. But it is more than adhering to God’s law. ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ Wise and understanding. That is what the world is to say about Christ’s church – wise and understanding. They are to see us as we truly are. They are to know that we are a sinful creature but that through faith we cling to the promise of forgiveness and the hope of everlasting life. They are to see that we are a merciful body – slow to anger and abounding in love.

And within the community of saints, we should be more open, more honest with each other. Matthew West is a contemporary Christian artist and his song, “Truth be Told” as the following lyrics:

Lie number one: You're supposed to have it all together
And when they ask how you're doing, just smile and tell them "Never better"
Lie number two: Everybody's life is perfect except yours
So keep your messes and your wounds and your secrets safe with you behind closed doors

The second verse starts in this way:

There's a sign on the door, says, "Come as you are," but I doubt it
'Cause if we lived like that was true, every Sunday morning pew would be crowded
But didn't You say church should look more like a hospital?
A safe place for the sick, the sinner and the scarred, and the prodigals
Like me

Within this community of saints we should recognize that we live a life, not of perfection but of reconciliation. We live a life where we daily die to sin and rise to new life in Christ. Within this body of believers we should not be afraid to lay open our book for each other to see because we recognize that our sins of doubt and pride will be met with encouragement and forgiveness and where the gospel of Christ will be the response from the lips of fellow believers.

My encouragement for you this morning is to open the book of your life for your brothers and sisters in Christ to read. Recognize that the areas you want hidden are the ones that most need exposed so that you can hear the message of forgiveness. Offer each other unending grace and mercy as you begin to know, to really know each other.

Please pray with me.

Lord,

I put on the whole armor of God, that I may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. But I recognize my contribution to my sinful thoughts and deeds. Remind me of my baptism and that I am forgiven, even as I continue to fall short of your expectations. Lord, I pray also for the wisdom to show love to my brothers and sisters as they open the books of their lives to me. Guide me in my words that I may remind them of your saving and forgiving grace. In your name we pray.

Amen.