

“Without Christ, the Whole Thing Crumbles”

Luke 20:9-19

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The cornerstone is not just an important piece in the building of a foundation, it is the most critical. Without it, the building cannot stand, and will collapse under its enormous weight. Every piece of that building plays an important role, but without the cornerstone, the stone upon which the foundation is laid, there can be no structure. It will all come tumbling down. In our Gospel lesson, the Lord proclaims that because of what is soon to happen at the hands of the religious leaders of Israel, there is no longer any escape from the truth that He is the foundation of the faith. He is the one who holds it in His hands, and keeps the house of God standing. On account of His great sacrifice for the sins of the world, the building stands strong, and welcomes all who believe in Him to stand within its walls and partake of its great benefits. But there are those who reject this cornerstone, who, like the Pharisees, reject the sacrifice of Christ as the atonement of the world.

And like a house that is built on sand, as Jesus teaches in Matthew 7:26, these men are foolish. Jesus says, “Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.” They built their house upon their own beliefs, and their own self-righteousness. Jesus, the cornerstone of the faith and the house of God, is all that is standing between them and ruin. He is the one that builds up. He is the one that sustains in body and soul, and He is the one who is the source of our righteousness and the only hope for our salvation. Without Christ, and His all-atoning sacrifice at Calvary, the whole thing crumbles. Brick by brick it falls to pieces as the one who died that the world might live is rejected and killed by those who should be looking for His salvation.

The death of the son in our parable is a clear foreshadowing of what the so-called “people of God” in Israel will do to Jesus, the promised Messiah who has been sent into the vineyard of the Father. They have elevated themselves so much, to a level of belief that they possess the promised inheritance and have the right to keep it at all costs. And just as they who took our Savior to the cross, all those who deny Jesus as the promised Son of God do the same, and share the same fate of those lost in unbelief. Now here is where we must take care, because though we believe in the promise of salvation for the sake of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice to redeem the world, we cannot ignore the reality that we, too, placed Him upon that accursed tree.

Not that we by our active unbelief placed Him there, but our sins and wretchedness did, because it is that sin and wretchedness which He bore as His own as He willingly went to the cross. An important distinction must be made here, because Jesus is not put on that cross by you, but He is there for you. He is there to shoulder the burden we have no ability to carry, to become sin and die the death that should be ours. And thanks be to God that He did die that death for our sakes! Because if we had to die the death that we deserve for our sins, then we would not descend into hell to proclaim victory as Jesus did, but we would descend into hell to dwell there for eternity, separated from the love of our God.

So, you are not the evil tenants in the parable Jesus tells this morning, but you are the grapes in the vineyard, those whom He has come to harvest and bring into His kingdom. But there are those who wish to keep that from happening, and harvest you unto themselves. This is the danger that we face as we battle the devil and his evil plans. Satan seeks to corrupt and destroy you, and will by every means at his disposal, even corrupting those who are “leaders” in the church, do whatever He must to achieve that goal. And if our faith is built upon our own works and deeds, or on our own ideas of what faith should be, whether that be the false idea that all roads lead to heaven, or that God is in your life to make you happy at all costs and bring you prosperity and wealth in this life, then all you are doing is helping the evil tenants kill the son of the vineyard owner.

While it’s somewhat hard to believe that even still, over 500 years later, there is still a need to preach against the papacy, “here we stand”, to borrow the words of the venerable Dr. Luther. Not all that long ago, the papacy proclaimed that “all religions lead to heaven,” that the door is not narrow as Jesus Himself teaches in Luke 13:24, but wide. I’m going to be careful not to descend into a diatribe about the failures of the Catholic church, because that is for another time and place, but the relevancy to our Gospel lesson cannot be overlooked. If there are many ways to heaven, and the door is wide open, then Jesus is not the cornerstone. For any who deny the truth that there is only one way to heaven, and that way being through the only Son of God, they must give an account for why they chose not to obey the words of our Lord. And not to the world, but to God Himself when they stand before the judgment seat.

Jesus says in the aforementioned Luke 13:24, “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.” All those that seek to enter heaven by any way other than Jesus, these other religions that the papacy says can make it through the same as those who have faith in Christ, simply will not make it through. They can try, and try, to convince themselves that even though they deny Christ

that they are worthy of entrance into His kingdom, but all they will hear from the master of the house is, as it says in verse 27 of the same chapter of Luke, “I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!”

That is why we cling so closely to the truth that we are justified by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone. All these other sects that come up with these wackadoodle ideas that we have no choice but to address are putting themselves in eternal danger if they allow these false teachings to take hold in their heart and override the truth of Jesus’ atonement. No one, and I mean no one, has the power to get themselves into heaven. No one, and I mean no one, has the power to override the Scripture and teach anything that is contrary to what is contained in it. Because what it is the Word of the cornerstone, the Word of Jesus who is God of very God. And not just that the Scriptures “contain” the Word of God as many try to make it, but that it IS the very Word of our God, the three in one, and one in three.

Those who came before Christ, the prophets of the Old Testament, are the ones sent ahead of the son in the parable. And as emissaries of the Father, they spoke with His authority. When we talk about emissaries of a king or a dignitary, they speak not just with the authority of the one who sent them, but as if the one who sent them is speaking himself. That is the force of the Holy Scripture, what the Law and the prophets spoke before Christ, and what He now speaks to fulfill it. And as we continue to walk this life of faith in this world, that truth of God’s Word will forever be our guiding light. We cannot abandon it, because abandoning it would be abandoning God. Casting out His Prophets and Apostles is casting out God, just as the messengers in our text are cast out of the vineyard.

The tenants believe that they have the upper hand on the owner. The Pharisees believe that they have the upper hand on God. False teachers in the world today believe that they know better what God says than what God actually says. And what God says is that He will destroy those who have done this evil and cast out His messengers and His Son. Completely contrary to the idea that all roads lead to heaven, isn’t it? And then, Jesus states who it is that will receive the inheritance in place of those whom God has destroyed. When Jesus says “the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” He is saying that all who are built upon Him, all who believe in Him as the Son of God, who has redeemed the world by His blood, will receive the promised inheritance of the vineyard.

By faith we are saved, and by our works, our faith is made known. As we press on in this life, we lean on the cornerstone, who is Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. “By His

wounds we are healed,” says the prophet Isaiah, and that is the truth that we cling to so tightly. We must never abandon Jesus as the foundation of saving faith, for without Him the faith is destroyed and falls to pieces. Our part in that faith is that we simply submit ourselves to the will of God, and He willingly and graciously imparts faith to us by the Holy Spirit, who works that submission in our hearts. By the grace of God, we are redeemed and stand righteous in His sight, but only for the sake of the one who has given all that we might live. According to the cornerstone of our faith, who holds us up by His Word, and feeds us with His very body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

Without the death of Jesus Christ to redeem the world, we would all be lost. There is no other way that we can be saved. Only through Christ, and by His blood, are we worthy to stand before the Father to receive the gracious gifts He brings to us. As we receive the very body and blood of our Lord and Savior in His Holy Supper here at His table, we are proclaiming His death until He comes, and strengthening our faith as we stand firm on the foundation of Him, who is the chief cornerstone. He holds up all things in His hands, as God of very God, who has given His own life that we might have life in Him. In the light of His grace, we stand firm upon the foundation which He alone holds together. No matter the rejection He faces in the world from those who think they don't need what Jesus has done, we stand ready to proclaim that we are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Because of His death, we are washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, and, as Paul says in our Epistle lesson this morning, we “strain forward to what lies ahead,” forsaking all else for eternal life in His loving care. Amen.