

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

2 Chronicles 28:8-15

Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as his father David had done, but he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel. He even made metal images for the Baals, and he made offerings in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom and burned his sons as an offering, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree.

That's how chapter 28 of 2 Chronicles begins, setting the stage for our first lesson. Notice the first things mentioned about Ahaz' reign: ***“he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord,”*** and he did not do so ***“as his father David had done.”*** Ahaz had veered from the way of the Lord and from the way of his fathers, specifically David. And how true isn't that still today. When someone in the church strays from the path of righteousness, when he or she does not do what is right in the eyes of the Lord, how often isn't he or she also forsaking the way and instruction of a godly father or mother? It is no coincidence that the Fourth Commandment, that we honor father and mother, is the first with a promise attached. On the other hand, there is also an important reminder here for parents. We must consistently make every effort to pass down the Word to our children, so that they will be equipped to do what is right in the eyes of the Lord. The pictures in the back give plenty of examples on both sides of that equation.

So what happened? What happened was what often happened throughout Israel's history and what also at times happens in our own lives: the Lord chastised to bring the wayward back to the truth. ***“Therefore the Lord his God gave him into the hand of the king of Syria, who defeated him and took captive a great number of his people and brought them to Damascus. He was also given into the hand of the king of Israel, who struck him with great force.”*** Notice that the writer doesn't simply say that the Lord gave Ahaz into the hand of the king of Syria, but that ***“the Lord his God”*** did so. Ahaz had forsaken the Lord, but the Lord still longed for the wicked king's repentance, still loved him. Sadly, we find out later that Ahaz had gone the other way. We find out, ***“In the time of his distress he became yet more faithless to the Lord—this same King Ahaz. For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus that had defeated him and said, ‘Because the gods of the kings of Syria helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me.’ But they were the ruin of him and of all Israel”*** (verses 22, 23).

Those are the bookends of our first lesson. Remember that Israel after the time of Solomon had split into two kingdoms, the north and the south. In the case of our first lesson, the people of the Northern Kingdom had been the Lord's instruments to chastise Judah and drive them back to the truth of His Word. The people of the Northern Kingdom, fellow Israelites, brothers and sisters of the people of Judah, racially, historically, and religiously, instead exploited the situation. They ***“took captive 200,000 of their relatives, women, sons, and daughters,”*** and they ***“also took much spoil from them and brought the spoil to Samaria.”*** Rather than realizing how serious their God was about sin when they witnessed the losses the people of Judah experienced in the war, the people of the Northern Kingdom instead plunged deep into sin themselves. This, obviously, was not going to go over well with the Lord.

So what do we learn from this incident. First, we are reminded of one of the lessons our Holy Gospel teaches us. Our neighbor is the one in need, and in this case the one in need was Judah, and Judah's brothers in the north should have recognized it. Rather than supplying balm for their wounds, they stuck their fingers in them, poured salt in them, plundered their women, children, and property. Jesus calls us to love our enemies, not to exploit them.

Second, we are reminded what the purpose of Christian discipline is to be in the church. We do not warn or chastise each other in God's flock in order to get even or get over them. No, we discipline in the church to bring the wandering back to the fold, so that they will see their sins and we will then be able to forgive them, to pour balm on their wounds. When tempted to hold the sins of others against them after they have already been forgiven, or when we act more slowly to forgive than we ought to, God's words to the people of the Northern Kingdom should strike us to the heart, "***Have you not sins of your own against the LORD your God?***"

Third, when others fall into sin and guilt, while working to win them back and love them in truth, we should be careful not to fall into sin and guilt with them. Jesus did indeed hang out with tax collectors and prostitutes, as is often pointed out, but he did not become one of them, did he? We must always be careful how we associate with those through whom we might be tempted to join in their immorality. As Christians, we are called to salt the culture, not to be swallowed up by it, individually or as a group. The same applies when it comes to church fellowship with other congregations or church bodies who are erring. The words of some of the chiefs of the Northern Kingdom should provide a clear warning, "***You shall not bring the captives in here, for you propose to bring upon us guilt against the LORD in addition to our present sins and guilt. For our guilt is already great, and there is fierce wrath against Israel.***"

Fourth, when we have sinned, we do well to bear appropriate fruits of repentance. When God has restored us to grace through the gospel, when we have been absolved, it is only right that we strive to make whatever we have done wrong right if possible. We see an appropriate example in first lesson. "***So the armed men left the captives and the spoil before the princes and all the assembly. And the men who have been mentioned by name rose and took the captives, and with the spoil they clothed all who were naked among them. They clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them, and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kinsfolk at Jericho, the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria.***" The people of the Northern Kingdom could not undo the slaughter, but they could return what had been plundered, and that is what they did, bringing them back to Jericho, which was Judean territory.

So what about you? When you have sinned against someone else, have you tried to make amends, not for forgiveness from the Lord—He grants that free of cost to the truly repentant—but because you are truly repentant, because you are grieved by the pain or hardship your sins may have caused someone else. Biblically, Christians do not make satisfaction in order to be forgiven, nor do they demand satisfaction to be made before granting forgiveness, but Scripture makes plain that forgiven Christians will strive to make amends, bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And that is what we have gathered here today: forgiven Christians. When Christ, our Good Samaritan, found us overcome by sin and helpless in the gutter, He did not pass by, busy with other things, unsympathetic with our plight. No, He stooped down from heaven, took our flesh, and lifted us up with Him on the cross, so that we one day will now be able to rise with Him in the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day. Amen.