

+ The Old Testament lesson assigned for this Sunday again takes us into the Intertestamental Apocrypha. During the same time period that the *Wisdom of Solomon* was composed, a Jewish scribe in Jerusalem, named Yeshua Bin Sirach, compiled a collection of proverbs and helpful advice for living that came to be known, in the Early Christian Church, as *Ecclesiasticus*—not to be confused with the book of *Ecclesiastes*, the canonical Old Testament book which was probably the work of King Solomon. The word “Ecclesiasticus” is Latin for “Churchy,” and the book was so called by the Early Christians because, though they recognized its lesser authority, it was nevertheless “to be read in the Church,” as our own Articles describe. Why it is that this text is paired with Christ's healing of the blind man is not immediately obvious, but I hope to propose an answer. Sirach writes:

Say not thou, It is through the Lord that I fell away: for thou oughtest not to do the things that he hateth. Say not thou, He hath caused me to err: for he hath no need of the sinful man. The Lord hateth all abomination; and they that fear God love it not. He himself made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of his own counsel; If thou wilt, to keep the commandments, and to perform acceptable faithfulness. He hath set fire and water before thee: stretch forth thy hand unto whichever thou wilt. Before man is life and death; and whichever pleaseth him shall be given him. For the wisdom of the Lord is great, and he is mighty in power, and beholdeth all things: And his eyes are upon them that fear him, and he knoweth every work of man. He hath commanded no man to do wickedly, neither hath he given any man licence to sin.

If you haven't read G.K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*, I highly recommend that you do so. In that book, Chesterton compares faithful and orthodox Christianity to a chariot driver, who in the course of directing the chariot around the race-track, must avoid the disastrous extremes of both the inside and the outside walls. Theologically speaking, it's important to realize that we all have a “favorite wall,” one which we favor, and, conversely, one which we studiously and irrationally avoid. When I was learning to drive, I think I gave my poor mother ulcers because of a tendency to drive away from the center lines, and nearly on the shoulder.

In reading the passage from Ecclesiasticus, we of the Reformed and Anglican tradition are likely to interpret it through our own peculiar phobia—the great heretical Elephant in our own room, i.e., the heresy of Pelagianism, which is, as Fr. Mark has mentioned in the past, the original bugbear of English Christianity. Pelagius, a monk from the British Isles whom the Welsh, the Scots, and the Irish none of which were particularly eager to claim, traveled to Rome in the 4th century, and, aghast at the moral laxity that he observed there among Christian laypeople, began to preach a rigorist and legalistic version of the Christian faith, which amounted to a denial of the doctrine of original sin—the theological admission that all humanity lies under the domination of sin, death, and the Devil, and thus stands in absolute reliance on the grace of God in Christ for salvation. Instead, Pelagius and his followers insisted that every human being had in his power the ability to achieve moral and spiritual perfection. In this scheme, Jesus Christ became a sort of “moral example” for us to follow, even if the supreme one. Largely as a result of the counter-arguments of St. Augustine, that genius of Western theology, the Roman, African, and Gallic Churches of modern-day France condemned the Pelagian heresy and expelled its adherents. Pelagius himself made his way to the Christian East, where he died without making much progress in spreading his ideas. His followers in Rome and elsewhere, ironically, made their way to his native Britain, where Pelagianism would continue to plague the Church for the next hundred years.

In this context, it's easy to interpret the passage from *Ecclesiasticus* as a sort of proto-Pelagian denial of original sin, with its strong affirmation of human freedom and responsibility. According to Sirach, God “left man in the in the hand of his own counsel,” with the responsibility to choose aright between the way of death and the way of life. By way of a metaphor, we stand at a crossroads—one road leads down to cooling waters, the refreshment and purity of life with God; the other leads to fire—to destruction and suffering, if we turn away from Him. It's easy to see how texts like this could have been “weaponized” by Pelagius and his followers, who denied the theological reality of original sin, and thus lost sight of the necessity and power of God's supernatural and saving grace.

But the adoption of this “Churchy” book by the Early Christians preceded the rise of the Pelagian heresy, and, in order understand it properly, we need to grasp the fact that the challenges to the orthodox integrity of the Early Church, and its earliest heresies, were on the other side of the race-track. We sense this in the pages of the New Testament itself. “Why not say,” St. Paul writes in his epistle to the Romans, “as some slanderously claim that we say—Let us do evil that good may result?” Rather than Pelagian rigorism and legalism, the false version of Christianity that plagued the Church, even in the time of the apostles themselves, was something that later theologians have described as “antinomian Gnosticism.” That's a mouthful, but what it amounted to was a claim that, because of the gracious offer of salvation through the work of Christ, the moral agency and responsibility of man was, in the last analysis, meaningless. As long as the believer was in possession of the correct knowledge or *gnosis*—i.e., as long as he intellectually assented to the correct propositions, everything was permitted. In fact, according to these false teachers, evil deeds were simply occasions for the good of forgiveness. St. Paul himself was slanderously included by his opponents in this category of false teachers, because he contended that true righteousness was not a function of the Mosaic Law, but rather came about through the gift of the Holy Spirit. In our epistle today, St. Paul is clear that, though this righteousness is a gift of God, and does not come about through a Pelagian self-sufficiency, it is nothing less than the sort of righteousness extolled by his Pharisaical opponents, but rather exceeds it in glory.

So, how are we to justify and hold in balance these twin truths—one the one hand, the moral agency and responsibility of man, none of whom God wills to do evil, and, on the other hand, the reality of sin, to which we are enslaved before receiving the grace of God in Christ. The corrective, i.e., the middle-course of Christian orthodoxy, is set out for us today in the miraculous healing of the deaf and dumb man. That this particular miracle was highly significant to the Early Church is obvious, because of its early incorporation into its liturgy and discipline. In the earliest centuries, when someone outside the Church was admitted as a catechumen, i.e., as one who was training to receive baptism, the Bishop of the local congregation would officially receive them as “hearers” of the gospel by anointing the ears and mouth of the catechumens, pronouncing in Aramaic “Ephathah.” I'm pretty sure I mentioned this last year when I preached on the same text. The deaf and dumb man is a symbol of our own spiritual and moral illness. Faced with our moral responsibility to choose between the way of life and the way of death, we find ourselves in a quandary. There seem to be insuperable obstacles. Before the coming of the Holy Spirit, we find that the way of death and sin is open, easy, free of blockage, and quite comfortable, even though the fire at the end of it might get hotter and hotter as we proceed. “Wide is the gate, and broad the way that leads to destruction,”

Christ himself warns us, “and many enter in through it.” On the other hand, anyone who has attempted to make progress in holiness, and especially to commit the cardinal error of doing so “under his own power,” can attest to the fact that choosing the way of life, of obedience, of self-sacrifice, of charity, purity, and peace—this way, if we remain under the domination of sin, death, and Satan, is littered with pitfalls, constant temptation, stumbling, and despair. “Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and few find it.”

The story does not end here, for the choice is not between wickedness and between acceptable faithfulness, unaided. Left to ourselves, the issue would never be in doubt, and we might justly complain that we have been caused to err—for in a very real way, sinful man is morally and spiritually deaf and dumb. But God Himself, the Physician of souls, has condescended in Christ to heal our infirmities, to restore that which in us has been marred by sin and by the fear of death. And he promises this healing to those that ask it of him. Small is the gate, and narrow the road—but “I am the gate,” Jesus says to us, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” “Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock, and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.” In fact, the grace of Christ is such that he heals even those who, like the deaf and dumb man, are brought to him by others, even though they cannot ask or seek for themselves.

Our faith is a seeking after and a submission to the healing which our Father offers us in Christ. But we receive that healing only inasmuch as we recognize our need for healing and spiritual guidance. Like the publican in last week's parable, we will only be justified—set on the right road, the way of life—once we admit our need of mercy and healing grace. This grace and this healing he has promised to grant to those who desire it; in fact, as the words of our collect put it this morning, God stands always ready to give more than we can desire, or deserve. He is willing, and he says: “Be clean. Be opened. Come, and let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely.” + Amen.