

Moving God to Act in Mercy

Ezra 8:21-23: *Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a **straight road** (literal from the Hebrew) for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, “**The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.**” So we fasted and implored our God for this, and **he listened to our entreaty.*** This is our text.

In case you’re not familiar, Ezra was a scribe, and teacher of the Word of God (Ezra 7:6,10,25). This means he knew God’s Word deeply, and could impress it on others. He was also an interface, a go-between: between God’s people and the officials of the Persian Empire...as well as the self-anointed purveyors of society—the peoples of the land, ones who antagonized and hindered the people of God. Ezra was tasked to return to Jerusalem from Babylonia (7:9) and appoint magistrates and judges who would execute God’s will in society there (7:25). He gathered a second-wave of returning exiles: priests who were to oversee the sacrifices and maintenance of the newly-built temple (7:17-25). Ezra would also make intercession on behalf of the people to God (10:1ff), many of whom had “broken faith” with God and committed adultery with the “peoples of the land.” (See chapters 9-10)

Before his work could begin, though, *Ezra had to get home.* The four month journey to Jerusalem was perilous; ambushes and raids were common. But Ezra says he was ashamed to seek an escort from the king, lest he think *they didn’t trust in God’s provision and protection.* Instead, he and his party camped at the River Ahava three days. There Ezra proclaimed a fast and the people humbled themselves before the Lord. They sought a safe journey, literally a “straight road” for themselves and their children. This Ezra did in the steadfast belief that God would bless their repentance and faithfulness—for *the hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against those who forsake him.* Ezra and his men fasted and implored God and, “He listened to our entreaty.”

The straight road. That’s what they sought. So much of our post-modern age is nuanced and perspectival and uncertain. But there’s always a straight road. God’s will and Word is that which is *clear*, that which is *certain*, and although narrow, that which is *straight*. For Christians, it’s also a hard road to walk. For we have so much which distracts us from the straight. So much that seeks to destroy and create crookedness. But as Christians, we start where Ezra does—*humbling ourselves before God* and *beseeking Christ for mercy.* For we are ashamed...over the kind of people we have become in our society. And we are sinners, so we need the mercy of Christ to help us overcome the kind of temptations we face, forgiveness for our failures to daily repent and seek the Lord for His good. Christ have mercy upon us. We implore You, good Lord, to hear us.

While there are many, many things that merit our attention as Christians in the world, every so often there is an issue that seems to galvanize (some) to action. Amendment 3, on the ballot in Missouri, is such an issue. Its language is deceptive; its purpose is to kill unborn children—to give “access to murder” to more people, for any reason.¹ We turn to God to seek His mercy for

¹ I intentionally use strong language for abortion. This is because ugly things need ugly sounding words. We are to call a thing what it is, and not hide behind euphemisms.

not only the unborn and the vulnerable, for the weak and the preyed upon, but our communities, state and country. We as followers of Jesus always run to the light, to the truth. We run to the straight road. We pray that the people of Missouri would vote “no” on Amendment 3.

The fact that I am writing this article stems from something that has crept into the Church—*the shame of silence*. The silence of the Church—manifested to the world in synods and assemblies, and locally in congregations and parishes—this silence is promoted from without and inculcated from within. Those outside the Church will say that She must be silent because there is to be a “separation” between what the Church says and what the state does. That’s not biblical, nor is it constitutional. But many from within the Church echo the same thing said on the outside. Many are uncomfortable with pastors saying things from the pulpit they deem “too political.” Many (maybe some of you!) think it’s in bad taste to have a “political sign” condemning abortion and promoting life on the property. Many think “politics” is only a personal decision and the Church should be silent. But that’s not true. The fact is, God cares about His entire creation and every aspect of life. The Church is to be the mouthpiece of God’s care and concerns, not just to those “in the Church” but to the world at large. But instead of speaking, the Church has been silent on so many things. So, during the silence of the Church (to our shame), something very interesting has occurred—*the political realm has become exceedingly theological*. Think about the topics routinely discussed in politics—marriage, life issues, human sexuality, human anthropology, humane treatment of God’s children, life...all of these “political” things are deeply theological. God’s Word and will has much to say about them. The Church must not be silent. She must speak, that is, *be political*, and inform the world what God says clearly in His Word.

But there’s also the problem of extreme apathy among Christians. This has also contributed to the silence of the Church. The apathetic culture that exists within manifests itself as “we can’t be bothered.” Can’t be bothered to pray. Can’t be bothered to seek God’s Word and truth. Can’t be bothered to speak, even within our faith communities. Can’t be bothered to act, applying the truth of God. Can’t be bothered to uphold the Fifth Commandment. Voting NO on Amendment 3 is actually the easy part. So, we repent of our silent inaction, and in the mercy of Christ, *we bear loud fruits*. The fruits of repentance grown in the seedbed of Christ’s love for us—His shed blood, nourished and empowered by His Spirit.

While I primarily write to encourage, I also find it necessary to persuade. The latest research and polling shows that *nearly half* of LCMS Lutherans support abortion. Maybe that’s not you. Maybe that’s not our congregation exactly. But how did we arrive as a Synod at such a state? Again, the Church has been largely silent on issues like abortion (the murder of children) for my lifetime, allowing even regular worship attenders to not be catechized by the Scripture, but instead by the culture. For where there is a vacuum of silence, there will always be an alternative voice. Those “voices” take the form of pious sounding rationales such as “compassionate healthcare for women” and “personal autonomy over a woman’s body.” These “maxims” have been adopted by many. While sounding reasonable to some, we have to see them for what they are—*a licentiousness driven by ideas from non-biblical voices that have infected the Church*. A turning away from God’s truth and desire, and instead to a privileging of each person’s own set of “morality” or “personal political views.” This gets expressed as “my right to choose.” So, instead of bearing the Spirit’s fruit, rooted in God’s truth, many adopt the language and practices of the enemy.

For we have an enemy, an “old, evil foe.” We are assailed by Satan, who seeks to sow his own kind of “fruits.” The works of darkness. Counting on inaction and silence from those connected to Christ, the works of darkness promote out-loud lies from those who’ve forsaken the Lord. As the devil prowls, he cloaks himself in slogans like “my body, my choice” and “separation of Church and State.” Things that seem to make some kind of “godly sense” but are *actual lies*.² Taking something good and twisting it...just enough to still sound plausible (even to Christians) but *leading to destruction*. But half-truths are still lies. Satan is the father of half-truths, as well as full-on prevarications. Lies are his native language, his mother tongue.

Satan cannot create; only our Triune God does that. He does, however, *twist*. This was the first lie, the root deceit—*did God really say?* “Did he really? Because from what makes sense to me,” Satan whispers, “you both can be like gods, knowing good and evil.” Every lie comes from this first perversion—a *twisting of the Word of God into something that might sound plausible and even pleasing...but into something that seeks to destroy*. Let this sit with you a moment. The impulse we all have to question God’s authority and Word is linked to this first temptation and fall. The voices that seek to obfuscate and deceive, the things done in the dark, the lies we tell ourselves...they are the work of Satan, manifested in our corrupt human nature, promoted by the fallen world bent on death and destruction. Satan perverts things—twists good things into something evil. It’s his *modus operandi*. In trying to tempt our Lord to sin, the devil uses a psalm, but twists it. And the more beautiful a thing is, the greater damage he can do with the perversion. Marriage, human sexuality, the gift of our bodies, human relationships, God’s Holy Word, the gift of life are good, beautiful gifts of God. As such, they will always be Satan’s primary targets.

The Roman Catholic apologist Peter Kreeft has observed that *abortion is actually a demonic parody of the Eucharist*. This demonic parody, Kreeft argues, is really a “sacrament of Satan.” Satan uses the same “holy words” as our Lord but *twists them*. Jesus says, “This is my body and blood, given and shed *for you*...” The Eucharist is a beautiful gift that gives forgiveness, life, and salvation. But Satan, through the lips of an abortion proponent, says, “This is *my* body! *My* choice! Given to me, *for me*.” Jesus gives life through His sacrificial meal; the “sacrament” of Satan seeks to snuff it out. Folks, this is why this issue is so hard to engage on and actually win. It’s not some mere disagreement over policy, but a deeply theological issue. Abortion isn’t another way of doing compassion or healthcare. It is a “sacrament” of self-centered death, a parody of Christ’s life-giving sacrifice. I say this not because *you* necessarily need convincing, but that you know how *deeply entrenched the opponents to life are*. For we’re not fighting flesh and blood, but cosmic powers over this present darkness.

But you are reading this article! May Christ be praised. So, what are we to do? You may ask, “What can I really do to change anything? What difference can I make?” You can pray. Always.

² There is nothing in our Constitution or Bill of Rights (the first Ten Amendments) that outlines that Church and State are to be separate. There is however, the *Establishment Clause*. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibits the federal government from *establishing a religion*, stating, “Congress shall pass no law respecting an establishment of religion.” This clause was written by James Madison, reflecting the widespread agreement after Independence that there should be *no nationally established church*. This does not “separate” Church from State; just that there is to be no national church (like the Church of England). The language for “separation” came from Thomas Jefferson, who weighed in on the Danbury Baptists right to assemble. In other words, this “wall of separation” was used by Jefferson to promote a right to free assembly.

Often. Purposefully. You can pray that God would be moved to mercy. So, at the end of this deep discussion, we return to Ezra, where we started. For the purpose of his fast, the call to humility—to repent and to turn to the Lord—was that *the Lord would provide a straight road and that the hand of the Lord would be upon His people*. “So we fasted and implored our God for this, and He listened to our entreaty.” He listened to their prayer.

The words of Martin Luther, the Large Catechism, the Lord’s Prayer provides great insight on prayer: *This we must know, that all our safety and protection consists in prayer alone. For we are far too weak against the devil and all his might and forces arrayed against us, trying to trample us underfoot. Therefore we must keep this in mind and grasp the weapons with which Christians are to arm themselves for resisting the devil. What do you think has accomplished such great results in the past, parrying the counsels and plots of our enemies and checking their murderous and seditious designs by which the devil expected to crush us, and the gospel as well, except that the prayers of a few godly people intervened like an iron wall on our side? Otherwise they would have seen a far different drama: the devil would have destroyed all Germany in its own blood. Now they may confidently laugh and make their snide comments. But by prayer alone we shall be a match both for them and for the devil, if only we persevere and do not become weary. For whenever a good Christian prays, “Dear Father, your will be done,” God replies from above, “Yes, dear child, it shall be done indeed, in spite of the devil and all the world.*

This is one of the many promises God makes—when we call upon Him, He will hear us. When we don’t know what to do, know how to fight the evil we see around us, we should always pray. But is that all? General prayers? Perhaps our prayer can be *targeted*. Pray for courage to speak out within your sphere of influence. Pray for opportunities to persuade. Pray for guidance on how to speak, where to act, what to say. Pray that we may use the only offensive weapon we have—the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. So, God hears our prayers. His Spirit also equips us to speak the truth with love to our neighbor. Love requires action; love is obedience to the truth of God. We pray that God would change the hard-heart of our family member or neighbor. We pray that God would give us the words to use to affect that change, by boldly speaking for life. We pray for water...and we dig a well.

We don’t know what will happen on November 5, for our state and country. For the unborn. We pray that God would be moved to act in mercy and not in righteous wrath. But whatever happens, we stand firm in Christ’s mercy, with the full and certain knowledge that God is in control and the gates of hell shall not prevail against His Church. And whatever the outcome of Amendment 3 (spare them, dear Jesus!), we have work to do. We are to *seek what is good, hate what is evil*, that we may live. For by so doing, we may have justice in our city gates. The hard work of fighting evil continues. But be encouraged that the battle is already won. The devil stands defeated by one little word—*Christ*. In the peace of Christ, we fight the fall, and Satan’s evil designs. We fight to protect life, no matter what may come. As we approach the election and whatever comes from it, we implore that God, through our prayer, would be moved to act in mercy and preserve the life of the unborn in our laws, in our lives, and in our courts.