

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

Third Sunday in Lent [Oculi] (2021)

The Defending Christian

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“But he said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”” (Luke 11:28, ESV)

Today’s Gospel Reading paints a vivid picture of how the world rails against God and His holy Son, Jesus Christ. As we can see, their vitriol knows no bounds, going so far as even to slander the Son of God by saying that He is of the devil. Yet such hatred should not surprise us, for man has been a hater of God ever since Adam fell in the garden.

Scripture grants us ample examples of man’s hatred toward God. The worldly deny the true, Triune God. St. Paul tells us, ***“For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” (Romans 1:21–23, ESV)*** But, as we can see in today’s Gospel Reading, such thinking wasn’t exclusively the thinking of the worldly. Even those who claimed to be His children, who claimed to be people of God, railed against His Son when He manifested Himself amongst them.

Throughout His ministry, our Lord Jesus faced opposition from those who should have known better. In many cases they did know better, but the fear of losing their prestigious positions was greater than their faith in the prophecy of the Messiah. So, they did and said all manner of things meant to denigrate and sully the reputation and authenticity of Jesus. Even calling Him a demon. But it was not until after His death and resurrection that the real persecution of His followers began. Followers who were called upon to be Defenders of the Faith.

Jesus warned His apostles that the world would hate them, saying, ***“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you . . . Whoever hates me hates my Father also.” (John 15:18-19, 23, ESV)*** As Jesus had warned, when His apostles began to proclaim the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins in His name, distributing the Sacraments according to His command, the world rose up against the truth of God’s Word, hating it and all their followers. It is no different today, the world hates God’s Word and you.

Now we might ask, how could the apostles and the early Christians hold up under this constant threat of persecution and death? How could they withstand the hatred of the world? They did it no differently than you or I or any other Christian today, by the strength of the indwelling Holy Spirit who fortifies you with the Word of God, emboldening your hearts to remain steadfast in the faith, thereby emboldening you to proclaim the Word of truth, the Gospel, to the world. But, as in the past, the world hates the light of God’s Word. Moreover, the world avoids the light of God’s Word because the light exposes their evil and sinful works, which means your faith places you in opposition to the world and thus the world hates you. Yet God calls on you to be a defender of the faith. He calls on you to be a *Defending Christian*.

Palm Sunday is but a few Sunday's away and most of you remember this day with great fondness, because on that day you were confirmed in the faith and brought into the Church. Your confirmation was an affirmation that you had been instructed in the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Your confirmation said you understood the seriousness of the spiritual self-examination demanded by St. Paul, who said, ***“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself”*** (1 Corinthians 11:28–29, ESV), it also verified your Christian knowledge and ability to testify according to St. Peter, who said, ***“In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,”*** (1 Peter 3:15, ESV) and lastly, it affirmed that you had been given the greatest defense you could ever have to defend yourself and the church against the enemies of the Cross, it affirmed that you had been given the Word of God (Titus 1:9). Thus, at your confirmation you were certified as a fully equipped Christian soldier, ready to do battle against Satan, his army of demons, and worldly unbelievers. A battle which is ever ongoing.

Today's Gospel shows us how the battle is enjoined by the forces of evil. Our Lord had throughout His ministry cast out demons and healed the sick. His miracles were on full display for all to see. Claiming to be the true judges of Holy Scripture, the Pharisees should have been able to recognize these miracles as proof that Jesus was the promised Messiah, but they refused to so acknowledge Him. These so-called religious leaders were more interested in the praise of men, seeking honor for themselves, and trusting in their own self-righteousness. So, when Jesus said to them, they had failed, that like the people they were sinners, omitting the weightier matters of the Law; repentance, mercy, forgiveness, and faith, He called them out for who they were, hypocrites. Moreover, He told that unless they repent of their sins and believe in Him as their Savior, they would die in their sins. But this was not the Savior they were looking for, or the Savior they desired. Angered by His accusations, His call to repentance, they rebelled against Him, denigrated Him, slandered Him, and put Him in league with the devil, calling Him a demon, ***“some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons.””*** (Luke 11:15, ESV) They refused to defend the faith of their fathers.

Our Lord defends Himself against these slanderous and blasphemous comments, saying, ***“Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul.”*** (Luke 11:17–18, ESV) Jesus reminds these would-be religious leaders, that the world knows, if a kingdom, or a city, or a house is divided against itself, one part fighting against the other, that organization cannot stand. Now, if it were true, as they boldly claim, that there is a civil war in hell, that Satan is casting out Satan, that one demon is undoing the work of another, doing it, as they claim, through Jesus, then certainly, hell will fall into ruin.

These words from Jesus should give us great pause regarding the state of the Church today. As followers of Christ, you are called upon to proclaim the Gospel in all its truth and purity. If the Church has a mixed message regarding the truth and purity of God's Word, of sin, repentance, and salvation, of the Gospel and the Means of Grace, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Absolution, how can such a Church raise up believers who follow God's Word, who stand against the world, the worldly, and Satan? How can such a Church make a defense for the hope that is in them? How can such a Church raise an army of *Defending Christians*? It can't!

Without the true and pure teaching of Holy Scripture, of the teachings of the Gospel, the Church becomes a ***“noisy gong or a clanging cymbal,”*** (1 Cor. 13:1) focusing more on the words of men than on the Word of God. Such preaching emboldens the world to reject Christ even more.

Indeed, it increases slander against God and His holy Son, Jesus Christ. It increases slander against the people of God.

Mixed messages embolden the unbeliever to spread evil reports, proclaiming that the church is full of hypocrites, they only want your money, they are not interested in your physical welfare, they preach a message that is no longer relevant to today's standards, they demand the impossible because they are simply too orthodox, the Bible they use is full of contradictions, and besides, everyone knows there is no God. Against these, and similar comments, we are called to defend the Word of God.

We have been called by God to be His children. Having received His call, He prompts us to desire a larger family, new brothers and sisters in Christ, who become so through true faith in the atoning sacrifice of God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. His prompting leads us to care about the salvation of souls and His Word teaches that salvation is only possible through faith, faith which comes only through hearing the Word of Christ. Faith does not come through a synergistic word which includes man's work along side of Christ'. Nor does faith come from a worldly word which claims that God loves everyone so much He simply ignores sin by removing the requirements of Law from His Word, therefore, people are free to live according to the flesh. Such teaching is false.

Regarding synergism, God's Word is clear, man has nothing to do with his salvation. One of the clearer verses is in the Gospel of John, where the apostle writes, ***"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."*** (John 1:12–13, *ESV*) Moreover, St. Paul reminds us worldly man is dead in his sins and trespasses (Eph. 2:1). So, I ask, how can a dead man work with God? How can a dead man decide? They can't! Scripture is clear, man is saved by the grace of God alone through faith. Moreover, faith is not intrinsic to man, but God's gift to man (Eph. 2:8-9). Out of His loving kindness, God saves us, not because of our help, or our cooperation, but solely according to His mercy which He pours out upon us through His Son, Jesus Christ (Titus 3:3-7).

Those who preach that God has removed the requirement of the Law, teach that it is okay to seek after the world and satisfy your fleshly desires fail to understand God's Word. The evangelist James teaches in his epistle, ***"Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God"*** (James 4:4, *ESV*) and St. Paul teaches, ***"For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."*** (Romans 8:5–8, *ESV*)

Therefore, to proclaim from the pulpit a message that is contrary to the Word of God denigrates the Church just as much as those Pharisees who were trying to denigrate Christ. Moreover, false messages from the Church do not accomplish that for which God established the Church, to make disciples of Christ. Instead, false teaching produces confused and erring people who call themselves followers of Christ, but who are being led into sin, death, and the devil rather than relying on the One who protects them from sin, death, and the devil, Jesus Christ.

But the *Defending Christian* defends the Word of God in every case where it is denigrated, calling out error in the Church while also refuting the lies and slanders of the world. The *Defending Christian* focuses on defending souls from the ravages of Satan and the horrors of hell

by carrying out the Great Commission of the Church, to ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”*** (Matthew 28:18–20, ESV)

Thus, clinging to the Word of God, the *Defending Christian* encourages and enables the proclamation of the Gospel in all its truth and purity while ensuring that the Sacraments are distributed according to the commands of Christ. The *Defending Christian* uses what God has given the Church to make and preserve disciples of Christ, His Means of Grace, Baptism, Holy Communion, and Absolution. The *Defending Christian* knows that salvation comes from only one source, the atoning sacrifice of Christ upon the Altar of the Cross. The *Defending Christian* keeps the Word of God. Are you a *Defending Christian*? If so, take up the armor of God, His Word, and defend the Church, defend the faithful, and go and make new disciples of Christ. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.