

The Final Examination

1Corinthians 4:1-5

The Third Sunday in Advent, December 17, 2017

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

God forbade us the knowledge of good and evil. God forbids those things which are harmful to us. The knowledge of good and evil has brought us harm.

One of the harms that it brings to us is the perpetual desire to examine others.

Sometimes this desire to examine others is well placed and needed.

For example we examine our public servants. It is required of us to examine our public servants. In the United States the ultimate authority is the people. The people express their will by voting for certain candidates who serve in public office. In order to determine whether or not someone is suitable to remain in office or be elected to public office the voters need to examine that person.

As voters we are required to govern the public estate with the natural law. Therefore we are required by God to make use of that natural law when we examine candidates for office to see whether or not they are indicating that they will govern according to the natural law. If they indicate that they will, then we vote for them. If they indicate that they will not, then we do not vote for them. Such indication of whether or not they will keep the natural law is indicated not only in their campaign promises, but also in how they conduct themselves in public. Therefore the lives of our public servants come under the examination of the electorate.

Such examination is necessary to maintain public order in a God pleasing way.

It is also necessary to examine one another within the Church.

We examine one another's actions in the determination of whether or not such actions indicate faith on the part of the fellow members of our congregation or whether it indicates faithlessness. Whether or not the actions of a fellow member of the congregation indicate penitence or sorrow over sin is subject to our examination. It is subject to our examination because God has commanded us that if someone in the congregation is trapped in a sin, the rest who are spiritual should restore him gently.

God has instituted church discipline. In order to faithfully administer church discipline the members of the congregation must faithfully examine the actions of fellow members of the congregation according to God's Word to determine whether or not expulsion from the congregation is necessary.

Examination is necessary when we are determining the orthodoxy of a preacher or of a new member of the congregation. Preachers and laity alike shall abide to the faithful Word as it has been taught. That faithful Word is the Word of God about Jesus Christ and everything that He has done for us. If a preacher or a member of the congregation deviates from that faithful Word, then that person is subject to the examination of the other members of the congregation.

Thus examination of the public servants of the state and examination of each other and of the preacher are necessary and God pleasing. In the case of public servants it is done knowledge of good and evil. In the case of preachers and fellow members of the congregation it is done with the Word of God.

But there are places where such examination cannot go because the things examined are hidden from us.

One of the main examinations that cannot be done is the success of the preacher.

I put forward John the Baptist as my example. He preaches in the wilderness of Judea proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Most of Judea and Jerusalem go out to him. They confess their sins and are baptized in the Jordan River.

This attracts the attention of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. When they send their representatives to John, John refuses to give them a direct answer to their question. John prefers to talk about those things which will advance their salvation. When the Pharisees and Sadducees personally go out to John, John rebukes them and calls them a brood of vipers. John thereby irks the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He loses their religious endorsement. When Herod Antipas arrests John, the Pharisees don't do anything to save him. Herod Antipas arrests John. He keeps John alive for a while and then finally has John beheaded.

Now, is John the Baptist a success as a preacher or not? Do not call him a success simply because he is in the Bible. Just because someone appears in the Bible does not mean that they are a success. Sometimes God puts people in His Bible that He wants you to imitate and sometimes He puts people in His Bible that He does not want you to imitate, but that so you may know what impenitence and faithlessness look like. Consider King Saul. But what about John the Baptist? How shall we examine him?

If a preacher today lost favor with the higher ups in his church body and was arrested by the government and imprisoned, would you consider that person to be a success or not? Do preachers today make it their aim and goal to offend higher ecclesiastical authority and governmental authority in order to be arrested? Is John the Baptist a success?

It is impossible for human reason even with the knowledge of good and evil to make such a determination.

Frankly, John the Baptist looks like a failure because there is not a preacher that I know, myself included, who makes it a point to offend ecclesiastical supervisors and offend the government officials, get himself arrested, and finally put to death.

And so it is among us. It is hard to tell the difference between a good preacher and a bad one. Our knowledge of good and evil moves us to make the examination even though our limited human reason cannot make such an examination in truth.

Let me put it to you this way. It is possible for a congregation whose average worship attendance is 2 000 to have only 10 of them enter into life everlasting when Jesus returns on the final day. It is also possible for a congregation whose average attendance is 50 to have 40 of them enter into life everlasting on the final day when Jesus returns to reveal all things. Which of the two congregations was successful? And how many of you want Immanuel Lutheran Church to be a congregation with an average attendance of 50? How many of you would sit calmly in the pews with an average attendance of 50 and say that everything is ok. For those of you who were here Thanksgiving Eve, we had an attendance of about 50 that night. Would you sit in the pew with the same confidence with that many people as you would with the number of people who are here this morning?

It is possible for a faithful preacher who does not have good preaching skills to administer the word of God in such a way that through him God is pleased to save more people than through the preacher who has eloquent preaching skills.

I put before you the prophet, Jonah. Frankly, in the final judgment Jonah is an unbeliever. He does not want to see God be merciful to Nineveh. He wants God to stick it to Nineveh. Since the heart of the Lord revealed in Jesus Christ is mercy, God wants to have mercy on Nineveh. That is why God sent Jonah to Nineveh. God sent Jonah to Nineveh to administer His Word so that the people would repent and be saved. Jonah wanted them judged and condemned. Jonah went and preached five words in Hebrew and the whole city repented. All of them from least of them to the greatest repented in sackcloth

and ashes. So here is a preacher who himself had no faith who administered the Word of God against his will (he had to be coerced into preaching by a big fish) and when the Word of God is finally administered, he is successful beyond imagination. The whole idolatrous city of Nineveh repents. But Isaiah can preach 66 chapters of the Word of God in eloquent poetry, the greatest of the whole Bible by poetic standards, to the people of Israel who were already acquainted with the one true God and yet has to lament in behalf of God, "All day long I held out My hands to an obstinate and stubborn people." And finally Isaiah himself says to the Lord, "Lord, who has believed our message?"

Thus the faith and the eloquence of the preacher are no indication of his success. Therefore we preachers should not succumb to the judgment of the congregation. Along with Paul, I am to consider it the least thing to be examined by you because we do not know what fruit there is of my ministry until Jesus returns and makes it known.

That also means that if there is success which we can examine, I cannot take credit for it either. I need your rebuke if ever there is success in the ministry and I take credit for it. Beware of me when I say to you that doing this or doing that will bring more members into the congregation. There is no way to examine that before the final day. I might build you a congregation full of hypocrites. And then where would we all be? So while I am beyond examination. I am also beyond praise. Everything will be revealed on the final day.

And that is true also of each other.

When I said that you examine each other in regards to your repentance I meant that you examine one another in regards to your actions which are subject to human examination with the knowledge of good and evil and the Word of God. We rebuke and correct based upon what a person says and does. We warn based upon what a person says and does, but where the person finally winds up will not be known until the final day. The final day will bring all things to light.

I am certain that preachers have said this in the past and I am going to say it also in accordance with what God says in 1Corinthians 4, you will be surprised on the final day when Jesus returns. You will be surprised at who makes it into life everlasting that you thought sure was lost. You will be surprised by who is thrown into everlasting hell fire whom you thought sure was a saved and righteous person. We cannot examine these things now.

A person who confesses Christ may be a hypocrite and not believe it. A person who denies Christ might think better of it later and repent. One does not know. One can only examine what one can examine.

This is why when I offer comfort, I offer comfort, not on the basis of a person's life, but rather on the basis of what God has worked in their lives. This is why it is foolish and wrongheaded to celebrate a person's life when they die. Of what value in everlasting life will be the examination of their life in this life? Our knowledge of good and evil is too limited to extend to those things. Rather when a person dies, it is important to celebrate what God did in their life. God has promised to work in His word and sacraments and so when someone dies we celebrate the Word and sacraments in their life. Through those things God has promised to work faith in Christ and we know from the Word of God that faith in Christ saves. Such knowledge is beyond the knowledge of good and evil, but it has been revealed by Christ. We celebrate those things so that we the living may be pointed to those things by which God brings salvation to us. If we do not do that, then we are left to examine their life according to the knowledge of good and evil and the knowledge of good and evil can only reveal the things of this life not of everlasting things.

Therefore in the final analysis none of you are subject to examination from men. You are subject to no examination of any human court. You are subject to them now in regard to temporal things that the knowledge of good and evil can judge. But you are not subject to them for everlasting things nor everlasting life.

You are subject only to the judgment of your Lord Jesus Christ. His judgment is coming. It is inevitable. When it comes He will reveal all things. He will reveal the sins that you try to keep a secret. He will reveal your faithfulness or your faithlessness.

That being the case you are not even subject to your own examination. You are subject only to His examination which He will give on that final day when He comes again in glory.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.