

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

SWORD PLAY VERSUS MERCY AND GRACE

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23)

Hebrews 4:12-16

Analysis by Timothy Hoyer

12 Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

14Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. 16Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

DIAGNOSIS: En Garde!

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – Daily Auditing

Imagine it: The return address of the letter had a stamp of a skull-and-cross-bones. It was a letter from the IRS that ordered you to be audited. That would be a word that divided soul from

spirit. Suddenly you would have to sit down because your joints would be divided from your marrow. Even if you had been as honest as you could on your tax return, you would still be fretting and sweating because maybe the IRS would not see things the same way you did. The rules are never perfectly clear. You would have to appear before the auditor who would question you, judging every thought and intention of your deductions. You would be laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom you must render an account. And this is only the IRS.

The writer, to the Hebrews, a witness to Christ, is saying that God's word is going to be even worse. God's word will bare your soul before God. And no matter how hard you tried to be good, to do what was right, you would worry because the law is not always perfectly clear. You would chew your nails because maybe God would not see what you did in the same way you do. This is why, in the Gospel reading for this same Sunday, a man ran up to Jesus, a man who had kept all the commandments of God, a man who was still worried about being audited by God, and asked, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?'

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – God's Auditing

The audit done by God's word does not look only at the record of what we have done—how we cared for our neighbor and how we did not care for our neighbor. The audit of God's word does not balance the caring acts against the uncaring acts and say you passed the audit if the caring acts are more than the uncaring acts. Such an audit would scare us, but most of us would think we would pass such an audit. However, the audit done by God's word does more than balance what we have done. God's word judges the thoughts and intentions of our heart! That's what makes the two-edged sword so sharp. Two things are judged in our heart. The first is that our intentions are not concerned about the care of our neighbor. Our intention is to make ourselves look good. We want to accrue more caring acts than uncaring acts so

that we pass the audit. So our intentions are revealed to be self-centered. Second, God's two-edged sword lays bare that our hearts trust the rules of God (the Law). We look to those rules for our justification, our goodness, our standing, our means to pass God's audit. But aren't we supposed to trust God's word? Isn't God's word of law what we are to follow for how we do God's will and how we please God? No. God's word of law was never meant as a way that we might pass God's audit. God's word of law not only tells us when we are not following the rules, but God's word of law exposes that we trust ourselves and our acts better than God. That's what the auditor from the office of God's law reports: We do not love God most of all. We have failed the very first rule of God's law—to have no other god. Whatever we use to look good before God, including God's law, is our god. We have taken God's law and made it our god. That is what the man had done in the Gospel reading. And the auditor laid bare his heart by saying, 'Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor.' That man's god—what he trusted, even more than the law, to make him look good—was his wealth.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *The Auditor's Verdict Is Always Death*

The very thing we trust—how good we are according to God's law—is the very thing that God uses to declare we have failed the audit. Trust the law and you get the law—and the law brings God's judgment and sentence of death. When we hold back money from the IRS, the IRS takes it. When we hold back our life from God, God takes it back. God's word that is sharper than any two-edged sword kills more surely than a sword. If you live by the sword you die by the sword. The law does not say that if we keep all the law from our youth we shall inherit eternal life. The law says that those who do not love God most of all must die. And, says the law, all have failed to love God.

PROGNOSIS: Grace and Mercy

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Christ's Crossed Bones*

For our sake, Jesus, the Son of God, has passed through the heavens. He passed through death on the cross and rose up to sit on the throne of grace. And Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. He has in every respect been tested as we are, yet without sin, that is, without trusting the law or anything else to give him life. He trusted God. Even on the cross, abandoned by God, he trusted God. Jesus knows our weakness, our weakness to trust other things for our goodness before God. He has been tested as we are, tempted to trust God's law, tempted to trust pleasure, status, reputation, wealth, education, family, children, or power as things that give life. But Jesus trusted God's promise that after he was handed over to law-trusters (sinners) and died, God would raise him to new life. So that all who believe that Jesus died for their sake and that for his sake we are forgiven, made righteous, and given eternal life—those same believers have forgiveness, are made righteous, and are made inheritors of eternal life.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Holding Christ and Not a Sword*

Christ has taken the thrust of the two-edged sword meant for us. But God raised him. The law has no hold on those who have passed through death. That's why we "hold fast to our confession" that Christ is how we pass God's audit. Christ does what we cannot do by overturning God's judgment against us. Christ gives us his life, his faith that God is our Father, his perfect audit. We get to hold onto what Christ has given us. We now approach the throne of grace, God's audit, with boldness. Our boldness is our trust that Christ is the only receipt we need to prove we inherit eternal life. Christ is all we need to get forgiveness from God. Christ is all we need to be right with God. We get to

“follow” him instead of the Law. Christ says all who are in him love God and are loved by God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Giving Christ to Others to Hold*

We are now in Christ, alive to God forever. But we still face the law’s auditing everyday. Even the innocuous question of, ‘How was your day, dear?’ is a question for which we must render an account. If we answered according to the law, we would tell of all that we did during the day and what we accomplished and how much we got done and how much more we are behind and still have to do. But since we trust Christ for how we have done during the day, we can answer that our day has been one of forgiveness and mercy. There was forgiveness and mercy given to us, and the forgiveness and mercy we gave to others. When family or friends fret and sweat because of an audit by their manager, a test at school, a spouse’s evaluation about how you took care of the kids or cleaned the bathroom, we can assure them of Christ’s mercy; this is the definitive word about their worth and goodness to us—much more important than how we feel they did at a chore. To assure others in this way is to place Christ into their heart as the one they can trust (instead of sending them looking to their performance for worth). We help them hold fast to their confession. Thus they know they can, in time of need, find grace through us (in Christ) to help them.