

DAY OF ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST

John 21:19-24

Contents: *Two doctrines, and the spiritual meaning of the gospel.*

Now thus he spake, signifying by what manner of death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me. Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; who also leaned back on his breast at the supper, and said, Lord who is he that betrayeth thee? Peter therefore seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me, This saying therefore went forth among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, that he should not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, ,what is that to thee? This is the disciple that beareth witness of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his witness is true.

1. When Christ asked Peter three times whether he loved him, and Peter answered three times, “Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee,” he commended unto him three times his sheep and said: “Feed my sheep.” Immediately afterwards he announced to Peter his death, and says: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest; but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not.” Closely joined to this is to-day’s Gospel: “Follow thou me,” as if to say: Since this is to be your lot, ponder it well and follow thou me and yield willingly to death. It is evident enough that this following signifies his death, and all the disciples understood it so, and it is a lucid and easy Gospel.

2. However as some were greatly worried to know whether St. John was dead or still alive, the Evangelist shows clearly enough that Christ did not wish to let us know, therefore we should not pry into the matter. He says: Jesus did not say he should not die, neither does he say that he should die. He thus lets it hang in doubt. If Christ had said: I will that he tarry till I come, it might have been understood that he would die on the last day. But that he says, “If I will, that he tarry”, it is still much more in the dark, in that he does not say right out whether he will or will not.

3. But in doing thus Christ taught us a beautiful and touching lesson for the sake of which Christ dismissed Peter in this manner.

THE TEACHING OF THIS GOSPEL

The teaching is as follows: Notwithstanding the examples and lives of all the saints every person should attend to the work entrusted to him and guard the honor of his calling. Oh, this is truly a needed and wholesome teaching. "It is very misleading, and it is almost universal, that we so highly esteem the works and lives of the saints. If we wish to imitate them, we think it to be a very precious work to do so. The useless babblers aid and urge this, who preach the lives of the holy saints and present them to the people for examples in the wrong way.

4. Here Christ works and speaks against this very thing. Peter is a type of such wild wanderers; when Christ had commanded him at once to follow him, he turns about and looks after another, worries as to where he is going whom Jesus had loved. Just so these persons do, they let drop what has been commanded them, and look after the lives and works of those God loved, namely his saints, therefore Christ reproves Peter, and says: What is that to thee, where he is wandering? Follow thou me, I will attend to him; how, if I wish him to tarry, wilt thou also tarry? Do you imagine I wish the same from you as from him? No, not so; you attend to your duties. I desire to have many kinds of servants, but not all to be at the same work.

5. Alas, many persons are found, who like Peter do everything except what is commanded them. Many a one hears that certain saints made pilgrimages, for which they are praised; then he like a fool starts off, leaves wife and children sitting, who are entrusted to him by God, and trots to St. Jacob, or here and there, not knowing that his calling and mission are quite different from that of the saint he is imitating. In the same way they do with their bequests, fastings, clothing, holidays, priestcraft, monasteries and cloisters. All that is nothing but looking around to the saints Christ loved, and turning their backs to the commission and calling to follow Christ. Then they boast they did well, in that they followed the saints.

6. Therefore take heed, that the way of God leads into the right road, First, it tolerates no human doctrine and way or command, secondly, it does not allow of any works, sought and devised by self. Thirdly, God's way cannot recognize the examples of the saints; but its anxiety is to be faithful, as God leads, in what he requires of us; as the prophet says in Psalm 25:8-12: "God shall instruct him in the way that he shall choose." Likewise: "And the weak will he teach his way," etc.

7. Then you may reply: But how if I am not called, what shall I do then? Answer: How is it possible that you are not called? You have always been in some state or station; you have always been a husband or wife, or boy or girl, or servant. Picture before you the humblest state. Are you a husband, and you think, you have not enough to do in that sphere to govern your wife, children, domestics and property so that all may be obedient to God and you do no one any wrong? Yea, if you had five heads and ten hands, even

then you would be too weak for your task, so that you would never dare to think of making a pilgrimage or doing any kind of saintly work.

8. Again: are you a son or daughter, and do you think you have not enough work with yourself, to continue chaste, pure and temperate during your youth, obey your parents, and offend no one by word or deed? Yea, since the custom of honoring such commands and callings has been abandoned, people go and pray with their rosaries and do like things, not belonging to their station in life, and no one ever thinks he is not faithful in his state or station.

9. Again: Are you a domestic or servant, and do you think you would go idle if you were to serve your lord or mistress with all faithfulness as your station and orders require, and also keep your youth under control as with a bridle?

10. And again: Are you a prince, a lord, spiritual or secular; who has more to do than you, in order that your subjects may do right, preserve peace, and wrong is done by no one? Why, do you think, the proverb originated: A prince or lord is a wild deer in the heavens? Only because they have their office and wish to rule far off when they cannot govern even themselves; afterwards they wish to atone for their folly by masses, bequests, rosaries, prayers and indulgences, as if God were a dealer in old clothes, or a child that permits himself to be fooled with a penny.

11. The very same way the bishop and spiritual prelates also act, who should feed the sheep of Christ and follow Christ, and even suffer death for their sake; instead, they observe their seven canonical hours for prayers, hold mass, and then allow themselves to be called pious people. But if one of the bishops enters heaven then a different heaven must be created. All bishops at present are nothing but fire works of hell, in that they do not administer their office, not even a hair's breadth of it.

12. See, as now no one is without some commission and calling, so no one is without some kind of work, if he desires to do what is right. Every one therefore is to take heed to continue in his calling, look to himself, faithfully do what is commanded him, and serve God and keep his commandments; then he will have so much to do that all time will be too short, all places too cramped, all resources of help too weak. For the evil spirit furiously attacks this way and makes it bitter for man so that it is all he can do to continue in it. But if Satan brings man to this point that he forgets and lets go his calling, then he no longer attacks him so hard, he has brought him out of the public highway, and he lets him at times hunt a prairie or timber path, that is, do a startling good little deed. Then the fool thinks he is on the right road and anticipates a great reward in heaven. The longer he wanders the farther he strays from the highway until he comes into the most pernicious delusions that he thinks we are to deal with God by means of his works, like King Saul did. Oh no, beloved mortal, God is not concerned about your works, but about your obedience, as Samuel 15:22 says; "To obey is better than sacrifice." Hence it is, that if a pious maid-servant goes forth with her orders, and sweeps the yard or cleans the stable;

or a man-servant in the same spirit plows and drives a team: they travel direct to heaven in the right road; while another who goes to St. Jacob or to church, and lets his office and work lie, travels straight to perdition.

13. Therefore we must close our eyes, not look at our works, whether they be great, small, honorable, contemptible, spiritual, temporal or what kind of an appearance and name they may have upon earth; but look to the command and to the obedience in the works. Do they govern you, then the work also is truly right and precious, and completely godly, although it springs forth as insignificant as a straw. However, if obedience and God's commandments do not dominate you, then the work is not right, but damnable, surely the devil's own doings, although it were even so great a work as to raise the dead. For it is decreed that God's eyes look not to the works, but to the obedience in the works. Therefore it is his will, that we look to his command and our calling, of which St. Paul says in Corinthians 7:17: "As God hath called each, so let him walk." And St. Peter says, Ye are to be as faithful, good shepherds or administrators of the manifold grace of God; so that each one may serve the other, and be helpful to him by means of what he has received, 1 Peter 4:10. See, here Peter says the grace and gifts of God are not one but manifold, and each is to tend to his own, develop the same and through them be of service to others.

14. What a glorious state of things would reign, if it were thus that each tended to his own affairs and yet thereby served others, and thus traveled together to heaven in one flock in the right road. St. Paul also writes in Romans 12:4-6 and 1 Corinthians 12:12: "The body has many members, but all have not the same office." Since we are many members of one congregation, but all have not the same office, no one should administer the office of another, but each his own, and all in childlike obedience and in the many offices and manifold works walk in unity and harmony.

15. Do you then reply: Alas, shall we not follow the lives and examples of the holy saints? Why are they then preached? Answer: One should preach them so as to praise God in them, to stir up one another, and to comfort one another by his goodness and grace and not show forth their works, but their obedience in their works. However in our days they let obedience lie and lead us so deeply into works, that we have completely drifted from obedience, and we gape at works and despise our own mission and calling. Hence there is no doubt it is Satan's own doings that divine worship is confined only to churches, altars, masses, singing, reading, offerings and the like, as if all other works were vain or of no use whatever. How could Satan mislead us more completely from the right way than when he confines God's worship within such narrow limits, only to the church and whatever is done in it?

16. Be on your guard, look in front of you, Christ will not suffer Peter to look around, not even to the disciple he still loves. Do you think it was for naught that the very disciple, whom Jesus loved, was preferred here to all the other disciples? It was for some purpose that he was not mentioned by name. He might indeed have said: Peter turned and saw

John; but he said, “whom Jesus loved” etc. But he wished to meet this evil and banish from their sight the works of the saints, in order that nothing but pure obedience might always abide there, and no one might glory or excuse himself in that he had followed the example of the saints.

17. Notice, we also read in the Scriptures that God did not wish David to build his church, although David took it in hand to do so; because there was no command before that he should build it; but he wished Solomon to build it, and to him he also gave a command to this end. It has been the spring of all kinds of idolatry that the people had respect to the works of the saints and not to their obedience. They witnessed how Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob offered to God upon altars; they heedlessly went ahead and desired to imitate them, and idolatry was the result. The Scriptures typify such persons by the monkeys. They are an animal with a nature that looks only to works, they wished to imitate everything, still nothing is commanded them.

18. Therefore let us well grasp the words: “Follow thou me.” Thou, thou; let others attend to their affairs, you attend to yours, they will indeed come. For it is not in vain that there is added in this Gospel, that the disciple whom Peter saw, was also following; but he was following without Peter’s looking. This whole gospel lesson has been written for the sake of these words and their teaching; for it does not contain much on the doctrine of faith, but on the following and the works of faith. In the person of Peter Christ here lectures all spiritual prelates and instructs them in their office; of this the whole Gospel ought to be made to treat, but these prelates wish perhaps to be untaught by us. Therefore we must pass it by, and stick to our own duties.

II. THE SECOND TEACHING. EACH SHOULD BE CONTENT IN HIS OWN CALLING.

19. The other lesson from this Gospel is, that everyone should be satisfied with his own part and not begrudge another anything, nor murmur although he is unlike him. For here, although John alone is called the disciple Jesus loves, still none of them murmured, neither did anyone envy him. in like manner, that he should not die, as they thought, grieved no one, and not a murmur went forth from them; but as the text says: “This saying therefore went forth among the brethren,” they, (we understand all the disciples and Christians) spoke of this as brethren and wished him well.

20. And this is no mean virtue; for even the holy patriarchs were lacking in this virtue and they could not stand the government of Joseph, their brother.

21. Moreover it is a common plague that no one can be satisfied with his own lot, so that the heathen say: How does it happen that there is always better fruit in another’s field, and that the neighbor’s cow gives more milk than our own? Again, –how does it come that no one allows himself to be content with his own state, each thinking that of another is better than his own? Whoever is a merchant praises the lot of a mechanic, that he sits at home and rests, while he must wander around in the country as if going astray. On the

other hand, the mechanic praises the lot of the merchant, because he is rich and is out among the people, and so on. Every person is tired of his own lot and sighs for a change. Is one married, then he praises the state of the one who has no wife; has he none, then he praises the married state. Is he in a spiritual calling, then he likes the secular; is he in a secular calling, then he prefers the spiritual; and so it is impossible for God to deal with them so that they are satisfied. If they serve God in the lot God gave them, it would be neither bitter nor heavy for them; but now they are tired and no one burdens them but themselves. Without the least need or cause they themselves make their lives bitter.

22. And if God allowed one to change his lot with all his will, to atone for his dissatisfied state; even then he would be like every one else, yea, become more tired and at last stay with his own. Hence one must not think of changing his lot, but of changing his spirit of discontent. Cast aside and change your restless spirit, then the lot of one would be like that of another, and all would be prized alike, as you have experienced that you neither needed nor wished a change.

23. Thus some heathen have thought if the evils of all people were brought together on a heap, and one then distributed them equally, it would come to the point that every one would prefer to retain his own. God rules the world so very evenly, that to every advantage is attached a like disadvantage. Every person sees no more than how sleek the shoe fits on another, but does not see where it pinches him; on the other hand the one who wears the shoe, thinks not how neatly it fits, but how sorely it pinches. The world rushes on in the folly that everyone looks only at his own evil and another's good; but when he beholds only his own good and also another's evil, then he will thank God, be satisfied in a most resigned manner, however humble and bad it may be about him.

24. To avoid such unrest, discontent and disgust in one's self, is helpful and necessary to faith, which is of the firm conviction, that God governs all alike, places each one in the lot, that is the most useful and suitable for him, and that it could not be better arranged, even if he did it himself. This faith brings rest, contentment, peace and banishes the tired spirit. But where it does not exist, and man judges according to his own feelings, thoughts and experiences, behold, there is a weary and discontented spirit, for he experiences only the evil of his own lot and not that of his neighbor; on the other hand, he does not see his own good side nor the bad side of his neighbor. Hence there follows out of this feeling weariness, dislike, worry and labor, and he becomes thereby impatient and dissatisfied with God. Then praise, love and thanks to God are silenced in him, and he remains his whole life a secret murmurer against God, like the Jews in the wilderness. Yet, the only thing he reaps from it, is that he makes his own life bitter, and merits hell thereby besides.

25. Hence you see, how faith is needed in everything and how it makes everything easy, good and sweet, even if you were in prison or in death, as the martyrs prove. And without faith all things are difficult, evil and bitter, although you possessed the pleasure and joy of the whole world, as all the great lords and wealthy prove, who at all times lead the most wretched lives.

26. Some say: Yes, if I knew that neither my folly nor Satan had led me, and I were assured that God himself took care of me, I would gladly be joyful, satisfied and contented. Answer: That is a foolish and unchristian pretense, which reveals a faithless heart. Christ says in Matthew 6:28: “Consider the lillies of the field, how they grow.” Again, not a leaf falls from the tree without the will of your heavenly Father, and not a bird comes upon the earth without his will; of how much more value are you than birds, you who are of much more value than they; the very hair of your head are all numbered, Matthew 10:29.

27. If then your existence is a state that in itself is not sinful, although you have come into it through sin and folly, the same existence or state will not therefore be the less displeasing to God; for God takes pleasure in all things, as Genesis 1:31 says, except sin. Therefore, where you are in a calling that is not sinful in itself, you are certainly placed there by God, and in the state that is pleasing to God; be only on your guard and do not sin in it. If you fall from a loft and break a bone the room or the bed therefore is not the worse or God more displeasing, into which the fall brought you and constrained you to remain, although another came there without such a fall.

28. When I speak of a calling, not sinful in itself, I do really pleasing to God, if you experience his disgust and displeasure; God is surely present there, he lets the wicked spirit attack and try you, if you are wavering or steadfast, or not, and offers your faith an occasion to battle and to exercise itself.

29. When I speak of a calling, which in itself is not sinful, I do not mean that we can live on the earth without sin. All callings and estates sin daily; but I mean the calling God has instituted or its institution is not opposed to God, as for example, marriage, man-servant, maid-servant, lord, wife, superintendent, ruler, judge, officer, farmer, citizen etc., I mention as sinful stations in life; robbery, usury, public women, and as they are at present, the pope, cardinals, bishops, priests, monks and nuns, who neither preach nor listen to preaching. For these callings are surely against God, where they only say mass and sing, and are not busy with God’s Word, so that an ordinary woman may much sooner enter heaven than one of these.

30. To be spiritual and not busy with God’s Word, which should be your special work, is like being married and never being together; but one running out here, the other there, to dissipate. Hence in order to lead such a life many chapters and cloisters have become houses of harlots and houses of villains for the service of Satan, to be pious in the body and outwardly, but in the soul there is nothing but sin.

III. THE SPIRITUAL OR MYSTERIOUS INTERPRETATION

31. With these two lessons we shall be satisfied for the present. St. Augustine, however, playfully as it were, interpretes the two apostles, Peter and John, as two sorts of lives. St. Peter as the life of reality, and St. John as the contemplative life. He adds: our real life must follow Christ and die, whereas the life contemplative remains forever.—This notion

is beautiful and ingenious; but some, by writing too much about these two kinds of lives, have obscured the whole matter and no longer know what life is real or contemplative.

32. But I, in my coarse manner of thinking, take it that the life of reality must not only cease bodily, but also die spiritually; that is, it must be discarded by the world, and man must not rely on his works, however good and necessary they be, but live alone by faith and rely on Christ; thus he will be the disciple whom Christ loves. Here the Gospel, so to speak, bursts open and pours forth the rays of its spiritual meaning too numerous for me to catch. Christ by his Word and life urges the performance of good works, but in reality has in view only faith.

33. Let us then take John to mean faith, or the inner life of the soul in faith; St. Peter, works, or the outer life in works –taking care, however, not to separate the two from each other in one person. Thus we shall behold mysterious things and understand the lives real and contemplative, with their death or continuance.

34. Firstly, we read that this was the disciple whom Christ loved. This means that faith alone makes the truly beloved disciples of Christ, who receive the Holy Spirit through this very same faith, not through their works. Works indeed also make disciples, but not beloved disciples: only temporal hypocrites who do not persevere. God's love does not uphold and keep them, for the reason that they do not believe.

35. Secondly, this is the disciple who at the supper leaned back on Christ's breast. It is surely something great and admirable that faith owns the heart of Christ, that is, it possesses all that Christ has and all right understanding. I have often said before that faith makes Christ and the believer one, both having the same things in common. That which Christ is and has becomes the property of the believer; and again, as St. Paul says, Romans 8:32. "God has delivered up his son for us all; how shall he not also freely with him give us all things?" Therefore a Christian believer relies on Christ, takes comfort from him, and leans on him as on his own, given to him by God. Even so did St. John lean back on Christ's breast, as on his couch, safe and secure.

36. Behold what abundant treasures the faith in Christ is and contains: it leans ever on Christ, bedding then safely and most gently, so that they fear nothing, neither sin, death, hell, the world, nor the devil; for they rest on life, on grace, and on eternal bliss, possessing all things in heaven and on earth—only in faith, however not manifestly as yet. This is indicated by the fact that St. John leans back on Christ's breast not after his resurrection or in the morning, but before the resurrection and at supper, that is to say in this life, which is an evening-meal, denoting the end of the world, when souls are nourished by the Gospel and the Easter-Lamb, that is prepared, served and eaten by faith and through the preaching of the Word.

37. Thirdly, he particularly mentions the breast, not the lap or the arms, indicating thereby that faith possesses all the wisdom of God and understands all things rightly. The same is also said by St. Paul, Corinthians 2:15-16: "We have the mind of Christ;" and

furthermore: “He that is spiritual judgeth all things, and he himself is judged of no man.” And 2 Corinthians 3:16 we read: “Whensoever it (the heart) shall turn to the Lord, the evil is taken away”, so that he knows all things. Therefore the believer can rightly judge all estates, all works, all doctrines, seeing what is good and right, and never failing.

38. Behold, thus through faith in Christ man not only possesses all things, but also rightly, certainly and wisely understands, knows and judges all things. This is typified by Moses in the law, Leviticus 9:31, where it is taught that of all animal offerings the breast is due and belongs to the priest. Priests however are all believers and Christians as we are told in 1 Peter 2:9. And therefore faith gives them all treasures and all wisdom, so that because of their treasures they are rich kings and have plenty, and that because of their wisdom they are great priests who can judge, distinguish and teach all the world.

39. Fourthly, this is the disciple who said to Jesus: “Lord, who is he that betrayeth thee?” What does this signify? Judas the traitor was a type of the pope, the bishops and all those priests who abandon the Word of God and prefer their own doctrines and works, at the same time uprooting all Christian truth. Yet their life has a fine spiritual semblance with all their religious doings and carrying on, and natural reason cannot comprehend how they can be mistaken, aye it even praises and supports them.

40. Now, since true faith and boastful works never go together, and since no one may rely on God’s grace and lean on the breast of Christ who relies on his works and doings; therefore grace and truth, when boastful works are exalted, decline equally much. Thus it comes about that through these traitors, the priests, truth steadily and secretly declines, so secretly in fact that true believers do not become aware of it, unless they diligently seek after truth. Has not Christ told us, Matthew 24:24, that even the elect, if possible, may be led astray? And therefore John is not content with leaning on the breast of Christ but anxiously and urgently he requires who may be the traitor.

41. Thus do the true believers, by exploring Christian truths and divine grace, learn who is the traitor; for noticing, as they do, that only grace— that is, Christ—and nothing but grace affords any help and that nothing else is to be relied upon, they easily see, by thus comparing and balancing grace and nature, that everything except grace is misleading. Then grace assures them and they behold that all such are traitors as set aside and uproot grace, who, in opposition to grace, establish doctrines and works, claiming thereby to make people religious and pious.

42. The betrayers of Christ therefore are the hypocrites who walk about with the semblance of a holy life and a spiritual estate, while at the same time they annihilate within themselves and in everybody else the truth of Christianity and the light of grace, leaving nothing but human folly. This is recognized only by such as have true faith, and even by such only when they pay special attention to it, investigate, examine and compare one with the other; otherwise they also will allow such works to pass, thinking in their simplicity that they are done in good faith, since, forsooth, they so closely

resemble genuine Christian works. And for this the traitor's name is Judas Iscariot. Judas means "confessor," for all such saints confess Christ, do not openly deny him and even, in their lives, appear better than the true confessors. Iscariot however means "reward," for such saints are only hirelings, egotists and seekers after pay; everything that they do they do for themselves and nothing freely, for the honor of God, even as Judas with his carrying of the purse only looked out for his advantage. Behold, thus the world abounds with religious people who, at heart, are nothing but Judas Iscariots, advantage-seekers and profit-servers, who with their outward semblance lead all the world astray and away from the right path of faith, despising and selling Christ, that is to say Christian truth and grace. Of this more anon during Lent.

43. Now you see why St. John does not mention his own name. For faith neither makes sects and differences, as works do, nor has it any particular works by which it desires to be mentioned; it performs all sorts of works, as they happen to be required, one as well as the other. But Judas Iscariot's band is divided according to their works, without reference to faith. One is called a bishop by mitre and crosier, not by faith; another, a Franciscan or Barefooted Friar, by his cowl and pattens; a third, an Augustinian, by his black cowl and so on. But faith, through all works and estates remains entirely nameless and that is why it makes disciples whom Christ loves. Peter indeed also has a name, for faith is not wholly destitute of works; but his is a name that Christ has given to him, not the cause of his being a beloved disciple.

44. Now we see what it means that this disciple is to remain and Peter to follow as said above. Faith remains until Christ comes, then it ceases; but works must perish and be despised. The world can take all things from us and destroy them, even our good works and good lives; but our faith it must permit to remain in our hearts, and it will remain even unto the last day. From all this it follows that St. John has not written such things concerning himself for his glory, as though he wished to be especially esteemed above all others. But he desired to describe the mysterious and abundant virtue of faith; nor did he fully understand till after the ascension of Christ that the Lord therefore caused such things to be done.

45. It is likewise a good sign that St. Peter turned to look at St. John, and not contrariwise. For the works are to look to faith, where it stands; not faith to the works.— Many more meanings could be found in this lesson by him who had time and the desire to look for them.

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