

The value of human life is given by God. He says after the Flood, **“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in His own image.”** And yet Cain slew Abel and lived. The Sanhedrin handed the Lord over to the Romans, then stoned Stephen, and they seemed to get away with it, faced no judgment in this life. Jeremiah was driven by his observation to say, **“Righteous are You, O LORD, when I plead with You; yet let me talk with You about Your judgments. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?”** (Jer 12:1).

It is not just a few wicked men in the Bible who seem to get away with it, go unpunished, unforgiven, seemingly rewarded. Every day in our country babies are murdered in their mother’s wombs and the men who do it pretend to be doctors concerned with health. In ancient Israel, being caught in adultery or fornication brought the death penalty. Today those who do far worse are set free after a couple years’ incarceration. And then, after years, decades, of such things, we wonder how on earth a madman can enter a church on a Wednesday morning, seeking and accomplishing the injury and death of schoolchildren.

The child of God is driven to cry out with the prophet Habakkuk, **“Why do You show me iniquity, and cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; there is strife, and contention arises. Therefore the law is powerless, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore perverse judgment proceeds”** (Hab 1:3–4). In the face of such things, the power of our reason and understanding must be deflated. Our vision is obscured by our own flesh. Our desire for justice is easily corrupted.

Repent. Place yourself once again under the Word of God. His ways are not our ways, but they are always good. Instead of insisting upon our own way, our own sense of justice, our own sense of what is good, set aside the desire to conform Him to ourselves, if we will apply our hearts to His Word, then we will find wisdom.

The Son of God did not die in vain. There is a sense in which that act is most unjust, the most horrific, and yet it was for our sake. That God’s own dear Son was crucified was not an oversight, but a deliberate act of divine love for us. And so that death changes not only how we understand our own deaths, but also our lives. Vengeance is His, thanks be to God, not ours. What is ours is salvation, forgiveness, everlasting life with God. This is the greatest truth, the constant refrain, the chief working of God throughout all of Scripture, all of human history, throughout all our own lives. Christ was happier dying for the wicked men who orchestrated His death than they were living. And so Abel was happier dying than Cain was living. John the Baptist rejoiced more in losing his head than Herod and Herodias in silencing his voice. Stephen rejoiced, already tasting heavenly bliss on earth as his enraged killers ground their teeth throwing stones, and then went home happy he was dead.

God’s wisdom, His goodness, even His providence, His ongoing care for this creation and all who live in it, cannot be judged by outward experience. We take it on faith because we are formed by our Lord’s cross. It is His innocent death for sinners that defines everything. It is that death, the suffering of that righteous One, that delivers life.

Who would have seen good in the violence visited upon Joseph by his brothers, or in the injustice of his imprisonment because of a scorned woman’s lie? Who can look at Bethlehem, can hear the wails of those

mothers over their slaughtered children, and pronounce it “good”? Who can hear of children’s lives taken as they were in church, and see anything good? Or who could predict that murderous Saul would become a preacher of the Gospel, that the thief and murderer hanging next to our Lord’s cross would be welcomed into paradise, or that a tax collector would go home justified?

Well we can. And we do. We are the baptized and so have been formed by the cross. We believe what God says and promises. We confess it. His name is upon us. His mercy is for us. Blessed be the name of the Lord; the One who giveth and who taketh away. We have the firstfruits of the dead who now lives, no one can snatch us out of His hand. This is true even though we groan within ourselves, even though we suffer deprivations, though we be despised by all men, mocked for our prayers, surrounded by wickedness and injustice. All that is to drive us to be more eager, to long all the more for the redemption of our bodies.

We trust that He who does not lie lives. And therefore we too shall live. **“We were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see,”** if we pray for justice in the midst of injustice, or simply for the madness and insanity which seems to have overtaken our land and this world to end, and if we have the forgiveness of sins and are reconciled to God in Christ Jesus already despite our sins, then **“we eagerly wait for it with perseverance,”** we wait for it with a hope that will be realized (Rom 8:24).

Jesus lives. Jesus loves us. And Jesus is coming back. And because of that, all is well. Not only in heaven, but also beginning already on earth. Even when the wicked seem to prosper. Even when the Pharisees make false boasts and despise us. Even then and always the mercy of the Lord endureth forever. The wicked do not really prosper. Contrary to the thinking of the flesh and our reason, it is often the case that the greater the seeming prosperity the greater the torment. Exhibit A: the biography of nearly every rock star who has ever lived. Exhibit B: nearly every lottery winner. Exhibit C: the Bible. Do not envy the wicked. Do not seek earthly treasure and pleasures, or the esteem of fickle men. Seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Both the Pharisee and the Tax Collector were wicked. They were both sinners. But one despised the other, refused the mercy of God, saw no need for it. The other went home justified. And yet the boastful Pharisee who despised his brother also went home. He was not struck down in instant judgment, but continued on in his hypocrisy, looking down on that tax collector, and we might well imagine plenty others. God’s preservation of earthly life for the wicked is not a reward. Cain was not slain for Abel, and yet he expected no good from either God or men. He expected to be slain even as he had slain his brother, to have done to him what he had done. He spent his days in fear and suspicion. He knew no peace.

In Christ Jesus, we learn to always expect good from God. We are not Judas or Saul in despair, we are Peter and David in repentance. We are not the Pharisee in the temple boasting in ourselves, our deeds, looking down upon others as though we are superior, we are the tax collector, reminding God of His promises, and asking for the mercy that we know He wants to give.

So we are not tossed about by the speculations or doctrines of men. We do not seek advantage over one another, but are growing up into Christ who is our head. Learn this and be rebuked: God’s allowance that wicked men go on uninterrupted in their sin is not a good life, a reward, or lack of care for us, it is the greatest punishment that one can suffer on earth. We read in Romans, **“God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the**

**Creator”** (Rom 1:24–25). Do not be jealous of the wicked, even when they seem to prosper. Do not envy Cain’s long life, Herod’s wealth, his son’s lascivious exploits, or the good esteem enjoyed by the Pharisee.

It is far worse to be left to yourself or to earthly riches than it is to be cut down early. The best of all things to have is neither of these. The best of all is to be reconciled to the Father in the love of the Son by the work of the Spirit; to be humbled in repentance and rich in God’s unmerited grace. The wicked do not prosper, the repentant always do. There is no more programmatic statement in Scripture than this: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.”**

The tax collector gives up his wicked lifestyle. He goes home justified, changed, declared righteous by God, his sins not counted against him. He does not go home seeking pleasure and riches, to continue on as though nothing has changed. He does not despise the Pharisee who despised him, but he can thank God that he is not like him. He thanks God that he has found mercy. He pities the Pharisee who only knows and values the good opinion of men and not of God. His desire for the Pharisee is that he too would turn and be saved.

The tax collector regrets his sin, desires to do right by those he wronged insofar as is possible, as the model of Zacchaeus shows. His guilt does not disable him. He trusts God’s Word. He believes in the certainty of God’s forgiveness. All the world may hate him, but he has peace with God. May God grant it to be so for us, not only that we have this peace for ourselves, but see it as the constant, divinely orchestrated theme of our lives.