

## Familiar Reasons and Cruciform Comfort

If you don't want to do something, you can always find a million-and-one reasons/excuses as to why you can't do it or shouldn't have to do it. The excuse doesn't even have to be that good. If you don't want to do it, it doesn't take too much convincing for you to not do it.

Now... **WHY** don't you want to do this particular thing? Is it a matter of **laziness**? Perhaps. We all have our days. Is it a matter of **selfishness**; i.e., I and my time and the things I like to do are more important. That certainly wouldn't be new. Selfishness and self-serving behavior is ultimately what got Adam and Eve into trouble, isn't it? Closely related to this is also the matter of **humility**. In fact, I would say it's the opposite side of the same coin. Again, Adam and Eve could certainly speak to that reality as well. A lack of faithful humility is what got them into trouble. In terms of humility, maybe you don't want to do the thing that needs doing because it's a **lowly task** and you think it's somehow beneath you; e.g., scrubbing toilets, taking out trash. "*Who do they think they are telling me to do that?!*" Old Adam is also pretty good at seeing himself in the martyr's role. "*Why can't someone else do it? I already do everything. Others need to step up and do their share!*"

Sometimes the reason we don't want to do something comes down to good old-fashioned fear. **Don't get me wrong either. This isn't always a bad thing!** God gives you a healthy sense of fear so you don't go doing stupid things that can get you hurt... or worse. **However... sometimes that overriding sense of fear isn't so healthy.** Sometimes we're afraid to do something because we see too much risk and not enough reward for our liking. But... that can always change, can't it? Make the reward a little better; a few more dollars, a few extra minutes of fame/glory, **and suddenly we don't mind taking the chance. Suddenly, it's not a chance but an opportunity.** Sometimes, though, it doesn't matter what the reward might be. There's risk involved, and some folks just don't do and won't do risk of any kind. **Go with the sure thing.** As the English have been saying since the early 1500s: "*Better the devil you know than the devil you don't,*" which just means it seems wiser to stick with a familiar problem or risk (even if it's bad) rather than gamble on an unknown one that could/might turn out to be worse. Yeah... the fear of what **might** happen has prevented a lot of good things from **actually** happening.

The reason I lead with all this is because we can see all these different realities playing out in the lives of the people in our Scripture lessons appointed for today. Start with the Old Testament. Moses is being called by God Himself to go back to Egypt—back to the Israelites, who are still in bondage—so that God can use him to lead them out of Egyptian bondage and into the Promised Land. Why doesn't Moses want to go back? Why does he initially fight the Lord's calling? **In**

*a word—fear.* He's afraid of Pharaoh. He's afraid of still having to suffer the consequences for killing an Egyptian in defense of an Israelite, and then going on the lam. He's afraid of the Israelites too. How many of them still see him as Egyptian? How many of them will trust him? He's a murderer, for God's sake! Moses is afraid because he already has a nice and comfortable life tending flocks with a loving family, far away from Egypt. Give up all the comfort and security for who knows what?! "*Better the devil you know....*"

Look to the Epistle lesson, and we can see much the same thing. The people St. Paul is writing to are afraid. They're afraid that Jesus had already returned in secret to resurrect the truly faithful, and they'd been "left behind." As I've said many times before, fear can make faithful people do/believe some very unfaithful and stupid things, and their fear was leading them to latch on to all kinds of false doctrines and teachings. When you're a drowning man, everything becomes a life preserver, and the devil, when you're down and feel like you're drowning, will make sure that you have a broad selection of dead weight posing as "life preservers" for you to latch onto. Their fear was causing them to forget (or outright forsake and reject) the Word of Truth that St. Paul had preached to them and baptized them into.

And as far as the Gospel lesson goes, the Sadducees rejected Jesus and the Word of God, particularly the blessed doctrine of the resurrection, because of their sinful arrogance and pride; because of their selfishness and lack of humility. "*Who does the carpenter's son from Hicksville, Galilee think He is teaching us?*" They rejected the Word of the resurrection because it didn't make sense to them, and since they didn't have a logical answer for it, ***then it must be wrong***. They also rejected Jesus and the Word out of fear; fear that they might have to admit they were wrong.

Now, I'm not going to go into great length here on how, if we're honest, we should be able to see ourselves in all three readings. ***Fear is very good at fueling our doubts, our unbelief, and our selective obedience*** (which is nothing more than disobedience) to God and His Word. We fear change, and God's Word changes us... ***at least, it's supposed to***. We fear that change, though, because life as a faithful child of God in this fallen and sinful world isn't easy. In fact, it can be downright miserable at times. We fear what others may think about us or do to us. We can be very selfish, self-centered, and self-serving. We often put ourselves and the things we prefer ahead of God (1<sup>st</sup> Commandment). We fear risk. We'll boast about ***boldly making leaps of faith***... unless the rewards we're seeking aren't worth the risk we'd take in leaping. "*Better the devil you know....*" There are plenty of times we opt for the sure thing, even if that sure thing is against God's Word and will.

Like those scared Christians in Thessalonica, there are times that we fear our Lord's promises of grace and love have somehow become null and void because

we're having to endure a bit of suffering. Fear fuels that sinful amnesia that makes us forget how the life lived in faithfulness in this fallen and sinful world works: "*Take up your cross and follow Me.*" Fear is very good at causing us, like drowning men, ***to reach out and latch on to any bit of trash that goes floating by in this storm-tossed sea of life***, rather than holding fast to the Rock of our Salvation who commands even the wind and the waves.

How often, just like the Sadducees, we fear having to admit we might actually be wrong. That whole "repentant humility" thing keeps a lot of people turned away from their Lord, defiantly marching their own sinful direction, rather than taking up their cross and following Him. ***People would rather be "right" than made righteous.*** How often we don't understand what our Lord says, so we condemn it. We condemn the message. We condemn the messenger. After all, if we don't get it (or we disagree with it), **then it must be wrong!** How often we reject our Lord and His Word simply because it doesn't fit with our paradigm of how things are supposed to be. How often we reject and take offense because to humble ourselves and confess our guilt simply isn't an option.

***But enough already. Let's talk about Jesus!*** Let's talk about He who willingly humbled Himself to the lowliest of positions, humbling Himself to the point of death on the cross. Let's talk about He who gave up all of heaven's majesty and glory ***in faithful, humble obedience to His Father***, willingly journeying into the proverbial Egypt of sin and death that is this fallen and sinful world, knowing full-well all that His mission would entail—***the pain, the sorrow, the suffering and wrath***—all so that He could redeem us and lead us out of death and into life; into the Promised Land that the Almighty Himself has prepared for us before the foundation of the world.

Let's talk about He who wasn't too proud to dine with sinners and reprobates, to touch the untouchable, to forgive those who hated Him and wanted nothing more than to destroy Him, those who deserved nothing but wrath and punishment. Let's talk about He who wasn't too proud to gird Himself with a washcloth and kneel low to wash the dirty feet of foul and undeserving sinners; ***His closest friends, who would betray Him, deny even knowing Him, and abandon Him just a few short hours later.*** Let's talk about He who **never** lost faith in His Father's love for Him, even as the whole world went dark and He suffered a hellish wrath you'll never be able to comprehend. Let's talk about He who rose victoriously from the dead after putting to death the powers of sin, the devil, and the grave.

You know what? ***Let's talk about what this all means for us right here, right now and for the rest of eternity.*** Let's talk about how He continues to kneel down from heaven's majesty, in the midst of all this sinful chaos and divisiveness, girding Himself under the veils of Word, water, bread, and wine, coming not in wrath, but to comfort and nourish a bunch of lowly sinners who deserve nothing

but present and eternal punishment. All our sinful fears. Our laziness. Our apathy. Our selfishness. All those sinful excuses we offer up, as if we have good and valid reasons to not obey Him and His Word. ***And yet... still He serves us. Still He shows mercy and grace to us. Still He loves us.***

And as for the future? We don't know what awaits us ten minutes from now, let alone ten days, ten months, or ten years from now. ***Things may get better. Then again, maybe this is as good as it's ever gonna get. Maybe it's all downhill from here. Who knows? Does it really matter?*** What we do know is that our Lord's baptismal promise how He is the firstfruits of all who believe in Him and fall asleep in the faith in Him ***holds true, regardless of what's shaking out in our lives or in the world at large.*** Christ Jesus has overcome sin, death, and the grave, ***and because of our baptism into Him, so will we.*** "Set your mind on the things above, not on things below." By grace, through faith, ***no matter how tough or fearful life may be at the moment,*** we know, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Thou art with me." ***When this Christ-centered reality is embraced in faith, what is there to be afraid of?***

More than this, we know what awaits us at the end of this shadowy valley—a lush green pasture with cool, still waters; a heavenly feast table; a heavenly mansion. We know that angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven are gathered even now around the throne of the Almighty in festal praise, and our spot in their heavenly midst is already reserved for us. We know the first words we'll hear upon passing through this veil of darkness and into the marvelous light of heaven will be, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master." "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

This blessed assurance just changes things. Christians are just different. We lead different lives than those who don't have this hope. ***Redeemed in Christ, we don't do the things of God because we have to, but because we want to; we get to.*** Christ is our reason. What more reason do you need? How could you possibly say "thank you" for all that He has done for you, purely by grace, in Christ and because of Christ? **Like I said, life in Christ is just different.**

I'll leave it at that. I pray that this Christ-centered difference is your reality, your confidence, and your joy and your peace, now and into all eternity.

AMEN