

“God’s Condescending Attitude”

TEXT

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The text for today’s message is this portion of today’s Gospel reading from St. John, the third chapter: ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” ¹⁶“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

INTRODUCTION

Don’t you hate it when someone is condescending toward you? You know, when a person makes you feel dumb, acts like she’s better than you. I had a coworker at the University of Michigan who liked to tell the nurses she worked with: “Don’t you worry your pretty little head about that; I’ll take care of it.” Whenever she said that, I could see the smoke rise from the other nurses’ ears—they hated her condescending attitude.

In his recent autobiography, *Not Dead Yet*, Phil Collins, the lead singer for the group Genesis, relates a story about meeting the famous Beatle, Paul McCartney. Phil met Paul at party at Buckingham Palace in 2002. At the time Paul was married to Heather Mills. Phil had a first edition of the book, *The Beatles*, by Hunter Davis, which he wanted Paul to sign. Paul turned to

Heather and said, “Oh Heather, our little Phil’s a bit of a Beatles fan.” Ouch. That’s condescending.

We’ve all experienced condescending attitudes—from politicians who act like we can’t think and do for ourselves, to physicians who speak “their jargon” in front of us, as if we’re not even there. This kind of condescending behavior, is summed up in the term, “Holier than thou.” I think we’d all agree—none of us likes condescending attitudes.

But one dictionary defines condescension in this way: behavior or an example of behavior that implies that somebody is graciously lowering himself or herself to the level of people less important or intelligent.

You see, not all condescending behavior is bad. There’s one Person who truly is “Holier than thou”—who graciously lowered Himself to the level of sinners, not so He could condemn us, but so He could save us.

AS SINNERS, WE CAN’T ASCEND TO GOD, SO GOD CONDESCENDS TO US—IN JESUS CHRIST, HE GRACIOUSLY COMES DOWN TO OUR LEVEL TO LIFT US UP TO HIM.

I. Man blows it when he tries to ascend to God.

Have you ever noticed that whenever human beings try to ascend to God’s level, they mess up big time?

Last week, we read Genesis chapter 3—the account of the temptation and fall into sin. There, man tried to be like God—to ascend to God’s level—and you know the result.

Later in Genesis, human beings tried again to ascend to God’s level at the Tower of Babel. Mankind used his collective strength and ambition to build a tower to reach heaven—and you know the result.

Throughout history, kings and emperors anointed themselves as divine—they believed they were better than their subjects and deserving of worship—and you know the result.

How about us today? When we look down upon others—like the homeless or the disabled or people of a different color—when we judge ourselves better than others—aren't we in a way making ourselves gods? Vegetarians consider themselves morally superior to meat-eaters. And non-smokers to smokers. How about PC users and Mac users? A PC user recently observed: “We won't dwell on the Mac users; they're pretty much hopeless and demented anyway.”

As sinners, we may hate condescending attitudes, but we work pretty hard to find that moral high ground upon which we can stand and lord it over others.

Jesus held up the Pharisees as an example of “Holier than thou” behavior. Luke records the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14): “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The truth is, we are never “holier than anyone else” because none of us is holier than anyone else in this world—we're all equally sinful and stand equally condemned for our sins before God. And it's pretty hard to love and forgive a person whom you consider beneath you.

II. God's condescending acts in Scripture.

And as sinners, no matter how hard we try, we can't ascend to God's level. But instead of leaving us under His wrath, God in His love and grace condescends to us. Throughout Scripture,

God graciously comes down to His people—not to condemn them but to help them, teach them, love them and save them.

After Adam and Eve fell into sin and were filled with shame and fear, God came down to them—He went looking for them in the Garden of Eden and promised to send them a Savior.

In today’s Old Testament reading, God came down to Abraham and promised to make him a great nation—a nation from which the Savior would come.

When the people of Israel were in bondage to the Egyptians, God heard their cries and came down to them. He was in the pillars of fire and smoke that led them in the wilderness. He defeated their enemies. He gave them water and food and brought them to the Promised Land.

And after the Exile, God came down to His people to return them to the Promised Land.

God doesn’t have a superior attitude toward sinners—He doesn’t look down on them like Paul McCartney did Phil Collins. Instead, God condescends in perfect love and grace.

III. Jesus came down from heaven to save the world.

And God’s greatest act of condescension is found in our Gospel reading, where Jesus says to Nicodemus: “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”

The purpose for this condescension wasn’t for Jesus to lord God’s holiness over us—nor was it to judge us—but to bring God’s holiness to us—the One who knew no sin would become sin for us. And on that Good Friday—lifted up on the cross as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness—Jesus would be cursed and reviled and mocked—He would suffer the condescending behavior of the crowds—so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.” That’s because all sin—including our “holier than thou” sins—would die with Him on the cross.

That's how much God loved the world—that he lowered His only-begotten Son to our level—to be treated and condemned as a sinner—to suffer and die a shameful death—so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

The Apostle Paul beautifully sums up the condescension of Jesus when He writes to the Philippians (2:5-11): Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

IV. Jesus still comes down to us in Word and Sacrament to lift us up to Him.

Today, in Word and Sacrament, Jesus still comes down to you. He condescends to you to give you the promise of salvation in His Word—to give you the forgiveness of your sins in His body and blood—and to give you hope for eternal life.

But He also comes down to you to lift you up—to exalt you as He has been exalted by His heavenly Father. When the world and the devil afflict you—when God's Holy Law convicts you—and you feel your sins and sorrows, Jesus comes down to you in Word and Sacrament. He knows your burdens and your broken and contrite hearts. And He comes down to lift you up in love and forgiveness. He reminds you that you are clothed with Him in Baptism—that you are a

child of God—that though we are all equally sinners, we are all equally washed by water and the Word.

CONCLUSION:

And empowered by the gracious condescension of Christ, the “holier than thou” attitude in us is replaced by love for neighbor. No longer do we need to life ourselves up by putting others down, for Christ has come to lift us up and gives us new hearts that desire to love and serve our neighbor. You see, in Christ’s love, you are able to lower yourselves to others, so that others may see Christ’s love in you.

In Jesus’ Name, Amen.