**The Things of God**

Based on [Matthew 16:21-28](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt16.21-28)

Preached on September 3, 2017

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 17

Pastor Nathan Fuehrer

In Isaiah Chapter 55, God says to his people, “**My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways…For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.**” (vv. 8-9). This is to say that seeking to understand all things about the ways of the Lord is futile. His plans and reasons are beyond our understanding.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus rebukes his disciple Peter, saying “**Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.**” The things of man are man’s ways; the things of God are God’s ways, and Jesus Christ our Lord and God says that they are different, incompatible and even opposed to one another.

Especially, when it comes to the issue of how to save the world, God’s thoughts and man’s thoughts are opposed to one another. God’s “ways and means” for saving the world involve first the suffering, then the death, and then the resurrection of his only begotten Son. In God’s mind and will, he has determined that for his Son and his sheep, suffering must come before glory, death before life, scandal before acquittal, prosecution before vindication. Jesus says these things to his disciples…and Peter rebukes him, scolds him for it. “**This shall never happen to you.”** Peter, who *so rightly* confessed Jesus’ identity only a few verses before, now *so wrongly* denies Jesus’ mission. The Father sent the Son to suffer, die and rise again. Peter says, in effect, “**You shall not surely die.**”

Those words should sound familiar to you. They are among the first words of Satan in the bible. When Eve told Satan God’ thoughts--that if she ate the forbidden fruit she would die--Satan told her, “**You shall not surely die**.” And now Peter tells the same lie to Jesus. Jesus told the disciples God’s thoughts--“The son of man must suffer many things and die”—Peter responded, “**Lord, You shall not surely die**.” So Jesus turned and he said to Peter exactly what Adam and Eve should have said to the serpent, “**Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.**”

The things of man are worldly things and worldly thinking. The thoughts of man are pragmatic and prudential…”the ends justify the means.” Now, bear with me. Mankind, even sinful, unbelieving, unsanctified Mankind, can often agree with God on the ends. God wants us to have peace, comfort and security. He wants you to live in joy, not fear. He wants you to be content, happy, not anxious. He desires that all things work for the Good of those who love him. In one sense, God and natural man have a sort of common ground when it comes to abstract “ends and goals.” When it comes to “ways and means,” however, Scripture is clear…God’s ways are not man’s ways.

In a word, sinful man is a pragmatist. But God is a legalist. God says, “Do what I say”…Man says “Do whatever works”. God says “obey my commandments” and you will live.” Man says, “Well, maybe sometimes. But sometimes, God, obeying your commandments just causes problems. For instance, you command me to forgive my brother, but I’ve tried that, and every time I forgive him, he goes and does the same thing all over again, and that’s not what you want. **But don’t worry Lord, you put a pretty good head on my shoulders.** And I can tell when forgiveness will “work” and when it won’t.

Certainly you don’t want me to just blindly forgive someone who says their sorry. A robot can do that. But you made me in your image, you gave me a brain and a desire to do the right thing, and I’m no spring chicken. I’ve learned a lot over the years and I’ve gotten to know people and how they think. Don’t worry God, you want people to be happy, the world to be safe and secure, your people to know you love them and care…leave it to me...God, I know what I’m doing.”

And the serpent said to eve, “You will not surely die, For God knows that when you eat of the fruit, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing Good and Evil.” “When you eat of it, your ways will be as good or better than God’s ways.” God says, “**Honor your father and your mother, that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth.**” Man says, “My father and mother are clueless and ignorant. If I obey them, it will not go well for me. I know better than them, so I will ignore them and do what I think is best. I won’t do what God says, I’ll do whatever works, that it may be well with me, and I may live long on the earth.”

Brothers and sisters, keep this distinction in mind. Tie it to your fingers, write it on your heart, teach it to your children. There are two types of thoughts at work in the world, God’s thoughts and mans thoughts. Man is a pragmatist, who thinks that his ways are better than God’s ways. God is a legalist. He says, your ways are not my ways, so don’t judge my ways, obey them, and trust me.

I heard an Anglican Christian on talk radio sometime back, who was talking about the current debate over homosexuality, whether it’s a sin or not, within Anglicanism. He agreed with God’s Word, that it’s a sin, and he praised the head of his Church—the current archbishop of Canterberry--for also agreeing with God’s word that it’s a sin. Which raised the next question, if he’s the supervisor of their church, why does he tolerate Anglican pastors and priests in the parish to teach wrongly. Why doesn’t he take measures to expunge those who teach false doctrine. And the man responded, “**Well, the archbishop, he’s got a big job holding our church together.**”

That’s pragmatism, the thought that god needs my brilliant ideas in order accomplish God’s goals, my personal touch to hold the church together. God’s word says homosexuality is a sin; any sex outside of marriage…a sin; divorce is a sin, neglecting the Sabbath day…a sin, and **he commands that we rebuke it**. But pastors and churches have become pragmatists thinking, “Yes they are sins, but if I preach that way, then people will leave the church, and we will scare away others from coming to us. It will tear the church apart and God doesn’t want that. That can’t be His way. What God really wants is for us to minister to the world, and so I have a great idea, if we only talk about what the world wants to hear, if when they sin we show not rebuke but understanding, when they disagree we don’t reaffirm God’s law but affirm them, we are doing God’s will.

You all know that two year ago already, I was in the process of being expunged from Immanuel Lutheran Church. I insisted that they needed to be following God’s commands about fellowship and closed communion. And I admit, that caused much controversy and stir, and many influential people from that church were threatening to leave, and some already had left, because they considered me too “legalistic” and they wanted a different pastor who wasn’t.

Right before this happened; I was talking to a former friend who was on the church council there. He liked me as a pastor, but thought maybe I should resign for the sake of the church. **I told him, if I resign it won’t solve any real problems. If I resign all I’m doing is silencing Gods Word for them.** His commands remain whether they come from me or the next guy. “But if you don’t leave, there’s a lot of people who say they will leave.” I said, if that’s God’s will, then God’s will be done. Jesus says I did not come to bring peace, but a sword, dividing families (Matt. 10:34). He responded, “**I just can’t see why God would want so many people to leave the church.**” Jesus vitually says, “I have come to be a homewrecker, and my way is this…that through dividing sheep and goats, I will unite my flock. And my friend played the part of Peter…”Far be it from you Lord, may it never be*.” I just can’t see why God would want to drive people away from the church.*

There it is, “**I just can’t see why God would want \_\_\_\_\_\_**” fill in the blank.” I just can’t see why God would want two homosexual people who love each to not enjoy marriage. I can’t see why God would require a piece of paper that says we’re married before we can save money and live together. I can’t see why a loving God would damn people to hell forever just because they don’t believe in Jesus. I can’t see why God wouldn’t want me to have communion at a different church. I can’t see why God wouldn’t want women to be pastors. I can’t see why \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ …

You see, that’s the point. You can’t see because you’re blind. I’m blind. By nature, according to the flesh we are all born blind, and until Jesus restores our sight by giving us faith in His infallible Word, we remain blind to the things of God. Paul writes, “**The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned**” (1 Cor 2:14). Of course, when you put God’s Word aside you are not going to be able to understand God’s purpose. It’s like taking off your glasses and then saying “I wonder why I can’t see?” He says, “**My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways, they are higher, better, greater that anything you can think of**.” “You don’t need to understand me; you only need to trust me.”

Jesus says to his disciples, “Here’s God’s thoughts: I must be delivered over to evil men, suffer, die and on the third day rise again.” And Peter says, “Lord, *I just can’t see* why God would want you to suffer and die.” But Jesus turned to Peter and said, “**Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.**”

The things of God are His Words, his plans, his express purposes, his clear commands and ordinances. And keeping his own counsel, God ordained the greatest mystery in the world: that his own son should live and reign only by way of suffering and death on a cross. Paul writes, “**For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart**.” Whoever would have thought that the way God would save the world is by means of his son dying on a cross? You can’t make this stuff up! “**Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!**” (Romans 11:33).

Christ’s death on the cross is a payment for our sins; Adam ate the fruit that condemned us to death; Jesus suffered the death that gives us life. And it is because of his sacrifice that our sins are forgiven, and if we live a life of repentance, he forgives our sins as many times as we ask.

That is the Gospel message, and the central teaching of God. However, here Jesus is teaching something else. Because His death on the cross is not only a ransom payment for our sins, it is also *an example* of how we are to live our lives in this world destined for destruction. Jesus says, “**If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.**” Pragmatists, Church bureaucrats and Pharisees, lawless men and rebellious women think, “God wants me to do whatever I think is best, so that myself, my family, my community, my church can avoid suffering and a cross.” That’s the Pragmatist, the one who thinks God needs his worldly wisdom.

The Legalist, the one who loves God’s law (Psalm 119:97) and who delights in Jesus Commands (John 14:15) says, “Lord, I know that if I follow your commands I’m likely going to suffer for it sometimes. I know that if I raise my kids to do the same, the world will hate them. I know if I teach your church to oppose the way of the world, it will probably shrink and struggle to survive. The days are coming and are already here where confessing your name before men will threaten my livelihood, maybe even my life. Shall I keep silent your Word to save my own life? No because you have promised, “**Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it**.” Therefore…

“*Take my life and let it be Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;*

*Take my moments and my days, Let them flow in ceaseless praise.”*

*“Take my will and make it Thine, It shall be no longer mine;*

*Take my heart, it is Thine own, It shall be Thy royal throne*.”

(LSB 783, vv. 1 & 5)