

O mighty and everlasting God, ... for the sake of Your great mercy, be gracious also to us; forgive us all our sins, and so govern us by Your Holy Spirit, that we may not ourselves be the cause of sickness and other afflictions; keep us in Your fear, and strengthen us by Your grace that we may escape temporal and eternal wrath and punishment; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary, by Veit Dietrich, p. 163)

Now when the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho saw [Elisha] opposite them, they said, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." And they came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. And they said to him, "Behold now, there are with your servants fifty strong men. Please let them go and seek your master. It may be that the Spirit of the LORD has caught him up and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley." And he said, "You shall not send." But when they urged him till he was ashamed, he said, "Send." They sent therefore fifty men. And for three days they sought him but did not find him. And they came back to him while he was staying at Jericho, and he said to them, "Did I not say to you, 'Do not go'?" Now the men of the city said to Elisha, "Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord sees, but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful." He said, "Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it." So they brought it to him. Then he went to the spring of water and threw salt in it and said, "Thus says the LORD, I have healed this water; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it." So the water has been healed to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke. He went up from there to Bethel, and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, "Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!" And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the LORD. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys. From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and from there he returned to Samaria.

In Christ Jesus, who came amongst us to do the proper work of His Church on earth, but also at times found it necessary to perform the alien work of condemnation, dear fellow redeemed:

Whenever Christian congregations experience a change in their pastorate, differences are noted. To the well-seasoned Christian the unimportant differences remain immaterial, but the real similarities to be looked for and found will be cherished. The real and salutary similarities are: the Word of God properly and faithfully preached and the sacraments rightly administered. The unimportant qualities are the sound of the voice, big or small frame, gentle or bold demeanor, sense of humor or lack thereof, full head of hair or balding.

A prophet of God who understands and rightly performs the work God has called him to do is what should always be recognized and appreciated by God's people. Our text recounts Elisha's replacement of Elijah. He was put to the test. We shall see he rightly understood and fulfilled his new calling. Let us then take note in this account that the **Church's Proper Work – Forgiveness; Alien Work – Condemnation.**

## I

The expression "the sons of the prophets" would be called seminarian students today. When they had witnessed their senior prophet, Elijah leave with Elisha miraculously crossing the Jordan river and Elisha returning alone with Elijah's mantle and crossing through the Jordan miraculously himself, they wanted to verify that Elijah was really gone. It was made known to Elijah and he made it known to them that he was leaving permanently. But the students wanted verification. Elijah had gone off into the wilderness on other occasions, like when he was severely depressed, so they wanted to send 50 searchers. Elisha denied their request at first, but finally conceded to their fruitless effort as shameful as it was toward him.

It is proper to test the prophet for sure. But as Jesus warned about false prophets, we are to know them by their fruits. Outward appearances mean nothing, because as Jesus warned - false prophets come to the flock of God in sheep's clothing, but are inwardly hungry wolves. But these testers did not know Elisha by his fruits, which would be his words, teachings. Frankly they even rejected Elijah's word telling them he was departing at God's command.

The testing continued when the men of Jericho asked Elisha to "heal" the bad water in their town. It was bringing about death and unfruitfulness. Elisha complies with their request and as he threw the salt into the spring of the water he said: "Thus says the LORD, I have healed this water; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it." It was purified and remained purified.

Now while these two episodes do not specifically speak of forgiveness being granted, we do witness God's graciousness at work in His prophet. In a sense we could see righteous anger expressed over against those who were not accepting of Elisha as Elijah's God-given replacement. But this is not the proper work of our gracious Savior God. He seeks to deal with us His beloved creatures, who have sinned against Him, in His love for us in His Son. God is not different in the Old Testament compared to the New Testament age.

We see our Lord dealing graciously with the paralyzed man in our Gospel lesson. Mark's account adds that those who brought the

man had to go up on the roof, remove roof panels and lowered the man down in front of Jesus. We could well imagine an important person speaking to a crowd and being disturbed by the commotion caused by lowering a man before him/her. Jesus did not wave His hand in a dismissive way even shooing everyone out, but rather received the man with the most burning issue that plagues us all alike. Jesus declares: "Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven."

This is the work that takes precedence even over the work of physical healing. Jesus went on to heal this man from his paralysis, of course. Jesus often times would heal people first before engaging them spiritually, but either way we see the main concern and proper demeanor our gracious Lord has for us all.

## II

But there is a time when condemnation is also spoken and meted out by Christ and His Church. So it happens in the next episode of our text. We are told after graciously dealing with people in Jericho, Elisha moved on to Bethel. Keep in mind this is one of the places of false worship set up by Jeroboam to keep God's people away from the proper temple worship in Jerusalem. He even took it a step further by building a golden calf as the image to be worshipped!

This idolatry was established about 100 years before the time of our text. As Elisha came to Bethel "some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, 'Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!'" This shameful blasphemous mockery was born out of generations of idolatrous unbelief. Remember the warning included in the conclusion of the 10 Commandments? "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the

children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me.”

Luther then explains it with these words *God threatens to punish all who transgress these commandments. Therefore we should fear His wrath and do nothing against these commandments.*

The unbelieving boys demanded Elisha imitate Elijah and go up out of sight - a way to shut the prophet of God up by taking him from them. Mocking the baldheaded Elisha's claim that he was God's replacement of the bushy-haired Elijah, they showed their utter contempt for God – a contempt no doubt heard and learned from their parents, maybe even grandparents. God's honor was at stake here. Immediate swift judgment came upon these godless mouthpieces. As ghastly as this episode was with the two she-bears coming down and mauling these boys, it was a foreshadowing of what would happen to the entire northern 10 tribes. Hosea would later foretell the judgment that was coming through the Assyrians when he prophesied: “Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open.” So it happened as prophesied.

Such condemnation is the alien work of our Lord and His Church but at times such stern warnings are given. The intent however is always to call the impenitent to repentance. Paul refers to all such temporal acts of condemnation in the Old Testament with

these words: “these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did ... they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.”

Remember also the last part of the Conclusion of the Law as explained by Luther? God also *promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore we should also love and trust in Him and willingly do according to His commandments.* You might point out that you do not always willingly keep His commandments. But then neither did the sons of prophets nor the men of Jericho, we are all sinners deserving everlasting condemnation. But through fear and trust in your gracious, all-forgiving God in Christ, you are forgiven and declared holy in His Son who was perfect in every way for you. This is the proper work of the Church that by God’s grace survives for us to this day. Be of good cheer your sins are all forgiven! Amen.