

Grace, mercy, and peace be with you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. You may be seated.

We have an interesting reading here from the Book of Acts. We have one of the first examples of the Gospel going forth into the Gentiles. And Peter has this strange vision of all these animals, clean and unclean and common, and they're coming down. And God says, "Kill and eat." And Peter's like, "Whoa, wait a second. I've only ate clean foods, I've never ate anything else." And God commands him three times to kill and eat.

So what is that all about? Again, we're talking about all the ceremonial laws and the dietary laws in the Old Testament. All of these laws, the eating clean animals versus unclean animals, even the way you dressed, the type of material you used, the sacrifices that you made, the festivals that you kept, including the 10 Commandments, but all the rest of the stuff that surrounded the 10 Commandments was all part of the old covenant.

And what was the purpose of the old covenant? The old covenant was to point us to hope for a new covenant because the old covenant did not do anything except show people that God was holy and you were not because of what you did, nobody. I mean, the amount of minutiae that is involved in trying to follow all of the ceremonial and dietary and clothing and all those laws were so specific and so precise that there was no way possible that anybody could follow them.

Now, this was to do a couple of things, but the primary thing was God gave us the 10 Commandments, the law, his law, his moral law, and we were called to live perfectly following that moral law. And just to make sure that we never got too prideful in thinking, "Well, I'm doing pretty good," he also gave us the ceremonial laws and the dietary laws and all these other laws, and he said, basically, "You can't even keep these simple things. There's no way you're even coming close to keeping the moral laws."

In other words, everything that was given in the Old Testament was to pull the rug out from us in thinking that we deserve the grace of God because we are holy, no, we're not, we're not even close. We cannot get there. And that's really what the old covenant was all about, was stripping us of our false securities and pushing us, pushing them and us to look to the one place and the one place only that we can find hope and promise and peace, and that is in Christ himself.

He comes to us and he gives us his grace and his mercy and his love. He comes to us and he has said, "It is finished." I mean, that's what he said on the cross, but here, in Revelation, we hear much the same thing when he says, "It is done. I've done it all."

When he was talking to his disciples, again, on the night that he was betrayed, he told them that, "I'm going, and where I go, you cannot come." Well, where was he going? He was going to the place where he would glorify God and God would be glorified in him. You've got all those glories going on there in the beginning of John. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and glorify him at once. It's a lot of glory going on.

What is it all about? Well, the glory of God is found on the cross. It doesn't look very glorious initially, but that's where his glory is found, in the humility where Christ went to suffer the punishment for all of us. The debt of sin was paid for when he finished his work on the cross. And that was what the Old Testament was doing, all those sacrifices was building up, building us up to the one moment in time where Christ would get rid of it all.

And so, in the Book of Acts, we have Peter having this vision that God has now opened up salvation to all people. We, in essence, are the unclean animals. Peter is now called to go to the unclean, the Gentiles. Because let's face it, not many of us are Jewish by our heritage, maybe there's a few of us, but not many. So we cannot claim God's love for us because of our heritage, because we're Jewish. God never wanted us to, but he wants us to go and claim our heritage based upon Christ and his salvation.

So everything that was happening in the old was done, complete. All the sacrifices were meant to point to the one sacrifice of the Lamb of God. When God promised Abraham or Abraham said to Isaac, "God will provide the Lamb," it's now fulfilled in Christ, it is done.

And so, all of the Old Testament, even the ripping of the curtain in the temple, that used to be where the Holy of Holies was, where the connection with God was, it's done. The sacrificial system is done because the sacrifice of Christ has been accomplished for us. And that's what he tells us then is, what we're looking forward to, not only the Jews, but also the Gentiles.

Because again, in the beginning of the church, it was mainly Jewish people, they were the first ones who heard it. And there was a debate, do you have to become Jewish first before you become Christian? Since Christ came from the Jewish faith and he followed the Jewish law, it follows, by reason, that if you want to become a Christian, you must first obey the Jewish law, get that right and then you can become a Christian. And that was kind of what some people were thinking.

But when God lets down that vision with all the unclean animals, he basically makes a statement, the law does nothing but kill you, the law does nothing but show you your sin. You don't need the ceremonial laws, you don't need the dress

laws anymore because Christ has come. They were only to point you to the fact that you could not do it yourself.

Now, the moral law still stands. We still seek to obey God and serve Him, the 10 Commandments and all, that still stands, but it serves another purpose in addition to showing us our sin now. It serves the purpose of guiding us and directing our lives.

See, Jesus Christ, in the night he's betrayed, he took bread and wine, but he also stripped himself and took some water and a towel and washed his disciples feet. And that's what he's talking about right here afterwards, he's just finished doing that. And now he's coming back saying, "I'm going to go to the cross, where you cannot follow me, where I'm going to win and purchase salvation for you all by paying your debt. And now, my call to you is to love one another as I have loved you. They will know you're Christians, and you will know who are my disciples if you have love for one another."

Now, this is what God is telling us to do while we wait for the culmination that we read in Revelation. In Revelation, we learned that a new heaven and a new Earth are going to be formed, that we will be gathered with Christ and that he'll wipe every tear from our eyes. This is the second time we heard that, last week, from chapter 7, and this week, from chapter 21, almost as if we need to be reassured over and over again of how much he loves us and cares for us.

He has finished the work and he has given us the prize. He has given us the hope and the security that we have in Christ Jesus. And now, we're called to love one another, but like the Old Testament people, that's a difficult task for us to listen to the Word of God and obey it. Because how often do we treat somebody that has irritated us, that has done something wrong, that is loud and obnoxious, that is rude, that is doing something that we disagree with, that is sitting in our pew... Right? I mean, how often do we get angry and frustrated at people for minor things?

But they will know we are Christians by our sanctimonious self-righteousness? By our superiority over other people? No. They will know we are Christians by our love. We are called to love, especially love the unlovable. Especially love the obnoxious. Because we don't know where the Holy Spirit is going to come.

Peter didn't anticipate that he was going to go to Caesarea and preach to Gentiles, and the Gentiles will be brought into the faith. It didn't even cross his mind until God came to him.

And it's the same thing for us, we are called to love everybody because we don't know. We don't know who's going to hear and who's going to receive the Holy Spirit and who's going to become part of the family. So we are called to love them.

We don't need to judge them, the Word of God does a good job of that already, as you well know. If you read it clearly, God's Word condemns us, kills us, shows us, as a mirror, all our faults and all our foibles.

But just like the law kills, Christ, in his glory, makes us alive. And now that we're alive, we take the law that showed us our sin and we seek to strive to do better tomorrow, to seek to love and to follow his Word so that others might know and hear the grace and the mercy of God.

So we don't see the full kingdom yet, but we have it now. We have God's will and work in us. And he has prepared for us good works to do so that we might do them and give glory to him. So let us seek out his Word. Let us seek to follow his promises. Let us seek to follow His law, which is good, so that we might demonstrate love to one another because he has loved us. So that we might forgive one another because he has forgiven us so much. So that we might be patient with one another because he has been so very patient with us.

His glory is manifested in his death and that death is given to us as a gift. Let us take that gift and love one another because he has loved us.

May His grace, his mercy, his peace, and his love be and abide with you always now and forever more unto life everlasting. Amen.

We confess the faith-