

## **Bad, Busy Excuses**

One look at the Gospel lesson, and it's plain to see that God isn't a fan of excuses. The meaning of the lesson is clear. There isn't some deeper mystery to unlock here. Making excuses and blowing off the Lord's gracious invitation is **never** a good thing. And before we go any further, we do need to make clear that Jesus is railing against *excuses*. There is a HUGE difference between "can't" and "won't," as in, "I can't be here" versus "I won't be here." Yes, sometimes people truly can't make it to church to be in the presence of their Lord and Savior and worship and feast with Him. Sometimes people get sick; too sick to leave the house; too sick to leave the hospital. Sometimes, like cops or military or nurses, you simply can't get away on Sunday mornings to worship. Sometimes you have to work. Sometimes things come up in life that you simply must tend to. It can't wait. *This isn't what you're Lord is talking about here.*

What angers your Lord, and—yes—I did say "anger," are **excuses**. Excuses are just like opinions, and we all know how "aromatic" opinions are, right? Now, it is important to caution that very good and valid reasons can easily become very habitual, stinking-to-high-heaven excuses. Don't kid yourself. We would **never** offer up some lame excuse like golfing or fishing or too much to drink as a way of justifying our absence from God and His feast of Word and Sacrament; grace, mercy, peace, and forgiveness. We **KNOW** that's not right. Those kinds of sinful excuses are what the other guy makes. Those are the excuses of the hypocrite. It's different in our case. We have very good and valid reasons. We would **NEVER** offer up excuses like some heathen hypocrite.

There's an old adage that says "*If the devil can't make you bad, he'll make you busy.*" That's very true. We can always be **too busy** for God. We can always find something that needs doing; something that just absolutely has to be done **RIGHT NOW**, and those couple hours we would lose at church are hours we just can't afford to waste. We would **LOVE** to be at church, but we have to work...every Sunday. (Never mind that we volunteer for those hours. Never mind that we really like the time-and-a-half wages that come with pulling Sunday hours, and the brownie points it earns when promotion time comes around.) "*God helps those who help themselves, right?*" We would **LOVE** to be at church...**but we just can't**. We would **LOVE** to be at church, but we have kids/grandkids, and they keep us very busy. The baby was up all night, and we didn't get our beauty sleep. The kids' game starts at 10am, and we can't miss the game...or practice...every Sunday...for the entire season, as well as offseason workouts and clinics. We want the kid to get a scholarship and be a star, right? God understands. We would **LOVE** to be at church, but it's been a rough, busy, stress-filled week—again—and we just weren't quite feeling up to it today...**again**. We're just not in the zone.

It's been a rough and busy week, and weekends are the *only* time we have to get away for a little R&R. God understands though. We still love Him. He knows that. We just need a break. We'll worship Him by enjoying a cup of coffee out on the patio while reading a tweet or a Facebook post about Jesus. Hmm... something stinks. It smells like an excuse, but...maybe that's just my opinion, right?

But...as I said, we understand all this. The meaning of the lesson is clear. None of that stuff about excuses pertains to us. *It is different in our case.* We don't need to go into a whole long thing on what constitutes an excuse and what constitutes a good and valid reason for absence from worship and feasting with the Lord in His house. We get it.

So...since we get it and understand it all so well, let's do something a little different. Let's come at this from a different perspective. **What if God behaved just like you?** Notice: I didn't ask about God acting like those foolish heathens with their lame excuses that everyone can see right through. No! What if God behaved just like you?

*“Yeah...I would really love to give you daily bread, but I just can't. I've been so busy, and I just needed a little Sabbath break. I'm so tired. You understand. I would really love to bestow grace and mercy upon you, but there's this whole thing with My children over in Syria that's keeping Me pretty busy and pre-occupied. I didn't get a whole lot of sleep with them. You understand, right? I would love to save you from eternal damnation, but that would mean that I would have to get out of bed and take a shower and get dressed and give up heaven's majesty, and I just don't have that kind of time. Thirty-three years is a long time, and I just can't afford to waste all that time. I'm needed here in heaven. It's busy. You understand, right? I would love to be the all-redeeming, all-atoning sacrifice for sin, but Fridays really don't work for me. Fridays are the only day I have to mow the lawn. I've got softball games on Fridays. That Friday especially is not good for Me. We're still going to be cleaning up from our supper party the night before. It just doesn't fit into my schedule. You understand, right?”*

Thank God that Jesus wasn't too busy for us and our salvation. Deliverance from sin, death, and the devil? This was all taken care of while we were yet still sinners; still yet dead in our trespasses. Jesus didn't wait for the dead corpse to come to life and ask for deliverance from death. He didn't wait for us to work out a deal with Him or wow Him with our amazing abilities and good works. While we were still dead in our sin, He saved us. He gave us life; life that comes only from God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Even in something as simple as “daily bread,” Almighty God is **CONSTANTLY** vigilant and on the job, providing, protecting, nourishing, disciplining...loving. He gives daily bread, not just to us, even when we don't ask for it or fail to return thanks for it, *but to all people*...even

those who hate Him and despise Him. He causes the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous. Blue sky overhead, air in the lungs...all undeserved gifts that we so often take for granted.

And that's one final point I do want to focus on with you today. God does give and provide all this goodness—including discipline and the love of the Father that dares to say “no” because He truly does know what's best for us—*even when we don't ask for it; even when we fail to thank Him for it*. Why do you come to church? Why are you here? Are you here to scratch God's back? Do you come to church because you want to try and stay on God's good side? Is that what you think—if you didn't show up and do your part, God might issue a recall and take it all away from you? That's not faith. That's selfish fear. Funerals are filled with “faithful folks” like that. Do you come to church because your life stinks right now, and you want more or better, and if you come do your part, *maybe God will return the favor and hook you up?* That's not faith. That's selfish greed. That treats God as nothing more than a genie in a lamp. Lots of AWOL Christians get real religious and active while they await unsettling test results or undergo scary and painful medical treatment. Once the clean bill of health is given, though; once they get what they want, they jump ship, head back to the casino, the patio, the yard. Like a dog, they return to their vomit. Why do you give? Why do you put money in the plate? For that tax-deductible “thank you” note that you get at the end of every year? *Again, do you give so that God will give in return, tit-for-tat, quid pro quo? “I do this for you, and you can do this for me.”* What if no one ever said “thank you” to you? Would you still do what you do, even if it meant no accolades or attention? Would you still show up?

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: If you're doing all that you do so that you can gain entrance into the heavenly feast, *then you're doing it for all the wrong reasons*. You just don't get it. I know that sounds strange to some of you. Why else would we do it? *We all want to get into heaven. Why else wouldn't we be good and faithful Christians?* That's just it! Thinking that doing all this; i.e., showing up and singing and putting money in the plate and volunteering and all the other things that busy little bees like to do, somehow merits entrance into heaven shows that you really don't get it.

Why do Christians go to heaven? Because they are saved through faith alone in all that Christ has done. They are saved and brought home to heaven, given a seat at the Lord's heavenly feast table, *not because of all that they did*, but simply because they trusted in and held fast to all that He has said and done. Faith alone in God's grace alone, which is ours because of the all-redeeming work and person of Christ alone.

So why do we Christians do what we do here at church? *Why bother?* If it's faith alone, we can believe anywhere. We don't need to be in a pew on a

certain day of the week in order to believe. Why bother? *Well...where is Jesus?* Where is your Lord and Savior? Where does He call you to be? Don't say He's in your heart! That little voice in your heart, feeding you line after line, excuse after excuse, convincing you that your excuses for staying away are somehow different and valid and God-pleasing, **is NOT Jesus!** Where is Jesus? Where does He call you to be? Where does He *promise* to be, handing out His free and undeserved gifts of grace, mercy, and peace? Folks: Here is the feast! It's not just a future-tense thing. Here is a *foretaste* of the eternal heavenly feast to come! The feast has *already* begun. It began when Christ declared, "*It is finished.*" Here is the foretaste of this victory feast.

Here is where heaven meets earth; where eternity intersects with the temporal; where Almighty God Himself dwells with and sups with His beloved children who still reside on this side of eternity. Here is where our risen and victorious Lord brings to us His blood-bought victories. Here is where His cruciform victories are given and shared. *I shouldn't have to tell Christians to think about this... but I do.* Here is your Lord, this very day and in your very presence, holding out to you the rich and overflowing abundance of His paschal feast! He doesn't give these gifts out on the golf course or on the patio around a cup of coffee and a sentimental Facebook post. Here is Christ!

When you understand this (an understanding that can only be realized by and through faith alone), you rightly understand that you have every reason in the world to be here, every chance and opportunity that you can. You have every reason; you have every **desire** to be here. It's not forced or coerced. It's not a chore. It's a joyous privilege and opportunity. **Faith WANTS to be where Jesus is!** In the light of Jesus, everything else is recognized as the lame, impotent, deadly and deceitful excuse it really is. Here is Christ! When you rightly and faithfully understand all this, all those excuses and self-justifications rightly turn into *repentance and confession*. By God's grace, the fertilizer that is our excuse for faith is turned into blessed fruits of living faith; blessed fruits of living faith that are borne and produced only when one is grafted to and joined with the living Vine that is Christ. "*Lord, to whom shall we go? Where else would we go? Where else would we be? Here you are, and you have the Words of eternal life.*"

May this cruciform, real-presence Christocentric reality—this joy, this ever-present, unconditional, and undeserved grace and peace—be your desire, your first love, and the reason for all that you say, think, and do, now and into all eternity.

**AMEN**