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Homiletics: Outlines on Ranke Epistles

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HOMILETICS

Outlines on the Ranke Epistles

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

REVELATION 2:1-7

The text speaks about the church in Ephesus. This city was famed for its temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the world; it was a great trade center, a growing city.

This was a privileged church. Among its leaders were such men as St. Paul, Timothy, and the apostle John. The opening verse of our text tells us that Jesus walked in her. This hallmark of the Ephesus church is shared by all our churches. So every church is a privileged church. Theme:

Let a Privileged Church See to Its Life

I. The Church at Ephesus had good and bad qualities

This is true of our church, too. We can, with profit, compare the good and the bad in the Ephesus church with the good and the bad in ours. We shall see similarities and differences.

A. Here are the features Jesus finds commendable in the church at Ephesus.

1. He commends the toil and labor of the Ephesian Christians (v. 2). The Ephesians apparently worked hard for Jesus and did not grow weary of their toil. Probably the impact of the great Paul had much to do with this ("in labors more abundant").
2. Jesus likes their patience and endurance (v. 3). These people, when required to suffer for Jesus, were willing to "take it." Playing on the word "bear" ("bear suffering" and "not bear evil men"), Jesus points to the next trait he finds praiseworthy.
3. Jesus likes the way they reject evildoers and false prophets in Ephesus (vv. 2, 6). The Nicolaitans are named (would permit Christians to eat meat sacrificed to idols and indulge in heathen immoralities).

B. After pointing out the virtues of the Ephesian Christians, Jesus puts His finger on their bad points.

1. The Christians at Ephesus had abandoned their first love (v. 4). Cp. Eph. 5:23-33. We are reminded of Israel's lapses.
2. Then Jesus says they should remember this love (v. 5). He wants them to think of what produced it (Summarize the Gospel as they heard it from Paul). And in order that they might realize what a precious thing they have lost, they are to think again about what that first love brought into their lives: peace in assured forgiveness, hope, power for spiritual victory, etc.

II. After drawing this portrait of the church of Ephesus, Jesus focuses attention on two very good reasons why she should pay attention to her life

A. He voices a threat.

1. "I will remove your lampstand from its place" (v. 5b, RSV). He will put an end to the church.
2. "Unless you repent" (v. 5c, RSV). Since Ignatius in his letters later speaks favorably of the Ephesians, they must have repented at this time.

B. Our gracious Lord Jesus quickly follows up the threat with a promise.

1. The tree of life—life with God—in Paradise is the prize (v. 7b).
2. It is for him who conquers (v. 7a). Here this means especially: It is for him who keeps the first love.

Remember Him who produced the first love in you. Remember this Jesus in the hearing and reading of the Gospel and in Holy Communion.

Pittsburgh, Pa.

ROBERT BANNON

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

REVELATION 2:8-11

You cannot tell much about a runner from the way he performs at the beginning of a race. When he is still full of energy and when the going is easy, even an inferior athlete can look good. It is toward the end of the race that hearts are pounding and muscles are aching and lungs are gasping for air. It is at this point that you can see what

a runner is made of. A winner drives ahead despite his weariness and pain. A loser falters and fades and may even drop out altogether. Things are much the same in the race of the Christian life. The most revealing point of the contest is not the beginning when interest and enthusiasm run high. It is not the smooth and easy places in the course. It is the tight spots, the suffering, and the final test of death that show what we are really like. Not a flashy beginning but a steady performance during tribulation and a strong finish our Lord is looking for. If we are faithful to Christ despite suffering and death, we shall attain everlasting life hereafter. Those who get the crown of life are those who are

Faithful Unto Death

I. *The devil tries to make us falter by means of suffering*

- A. We suffer. At various points of our lives, and especially as death draws near, we are apt to experience pain and difficulty. In our text St. John refers to the tribulation and poverty and blasphemy that the Christians of Smyrna were going through on account of the opposition of the Jews (v.9). For the present at least, we are not called up to suffer much on account of our faith, but nevertheless we do continue to suffer.
- B. This suffering is the work of the devil (v.10). He wants to make us falter, become bitter toward God on account of our suffering, and even lose our faith altogether. He succeeds all too often. We are inclined to think that because we are Christians, we ought to be better off materially than other people. We think that God owes this to us, and if things do not go smoothly, we feel that He has let us down.

II. *Faithfulness leads to the crown of life*

- A. We should be faithful to God—keep trusting Him, loving Him, worshipping Him, and serving Him despite our suffering. We should not be afraid of suffering, but should accept it confidently; we should conquer all temptation and fear. Instead of turning away from God in bitterness, we should keep turning to Him for encouragement and strength. Even death should not cause us dismay.
- B. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life" (v.10). If we are faithful, we shall receive a glorious reward. When the race is over and life is through, we shall stand in the winner's circle and wear the champion's crown.

For us death will not be the end, but a wonderful beginning. It will not lead to a second and even worse death (v. 11), but rather to eternal life. From the tribulation of this world we shall pass through death into the joy and peace of heaven.

III. *Christ wins for us the crown of life that we obtain*

- A. We do not earn the crown of life that we receive. We do not pay for our place in heaven. Even very strong and faithful believers are not good enough to deserve eternal life in the presence of God. At our best we are still weak and unworthy sinners. God knows that we are never completely faithful.
- B. "I will *give* thee a crown of life" (v. 10). What we cannot earn for ourselves, Jesus Christ has won for us and wants to present to us as a free gift. The only reason why any of us can hope to reach heaven is this divine generosity. In Christ God Himself has made up for whatever we lack. He has atoned for all our sins and shortcomings through the death and resurrection of His own dear Son (v. 8). The price He paid for your crown of life was His own blood and the bitter agony of soul that He endured while hanging upon the cross.

On the day of your confirmation or Baptism you promised God the same kind of faithfulness that He asks for in this text. It was an exciting moment, no doubt, when you began the race of your Christian life. By now perhaps the excitement is gone, and your life has become a hard and painful struggle. For your inspiration and encouragement your Lord speaks to you again today. He urges you to stick to your promise, to hold to Him, despite your suffering and trouble. After all, your crown of life is guaranteed by His own blood, shed for you on the cross. The race will soon be over, and the crown of life will be yours. No matter what may come, be faithful.

St. Louis, Mo.

MILTON L. RUDNICK

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

REVELATION 3:1-6

"Wake up, America!" This was the theme of the message of Dr. Victor E. Swenson, Lutheran missionary to the Chinese for 44 years. In his final report to a church convention this summer, he stated: "Americans are too rich, so they don't need God. Here there is a great longing for more money, more automobiles, more land, more gadgets

... not enough stress on the spiritual values that built this nation." The text has a similar message for the church at Sardis. The description fits many parishes in America today. Every church needs to realize that the two alternatives it faces are: to die or not to die. Every church needs to be watchful that it may remain a living church, a dynamic force for God; and that it does not come to be like the church at Sardis.

A Dying Church

I. *What makes a church a dying church?*

A. Death at Sardis.

1. The city of Sardis. Ancient capital of Lydia; well fortified, cliffs on three sides, narrow lane on fourth side. Easy to defend, called the "city unconquerable." King Croesus, "the richest man in the world." Gold panned from the sands of the river Pactolus. The city was captured in 495 B. C. by the Persian king Cyrus. The soldiers who were to guard the city were off guard, careless, asleep.
2. The church at Sardis. Little known, only Biblical reference in text. Like other letters in Revelation 2 and 3, addressed "unto the angel," the messenger, the preacher; through him, to the members (v.1). "I know thy works." God always knows. "Thou hast a name that thou livest"—good reputation, favorably known, good front, perhaps resting on past laurels. No scandalous evils—just asleep, useless, hopeless, degenerated—"thou art dead."

B. Death at "Crossroads," U. S. A.

1. The danger of dry rot. How is it in your church? What is happening at your "crossroad of America"? How green is God's vineyard in your midst? Dry rot always a danger. The engineers and building contractors made their report on No. 10 Downing St., London, the home of the Prime Minister: "It is a house of ruin; not worth repairing; dry rot in the wood; condemn it; tear it down; destroy it." "Nonsense!" cried Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. "It will stand another 200 years." God warns (v.1). How do we react? "Nonsense!" "Nothing wrong here; all is well; impressive membership; well-known, good reputation." *Theology Today* reports on survey in Ohio, denomination unnamed: "Average congregations; typical members"—20% never attended; 40% never gave; 90% never had family prayers; 95% never

gave tithes; 95% never invited anyone to share Christ. A nurseryman with this kind of dry rot in his orchard would sharpen shears and saw; he would cut, prune, and trim until dead branches are gone; fruit-bearing branches could produce better. Cf. John 15, parable of vine and branches. Some dry rot in every church.

2. Reasons for dry rot not stated, but implied in commands given.
 - a. Formalism. "Be watchful and strengthen . . ." At Sardis, lip service, cold hearts, meager works. Cf. Matt. 7:21-23: "not everyone . . . Lord, Lord . . ." God's work will not be done by automation; demands more than "Milltown" approach of phlegmatic, nonchalant carelessness; involves more than "Sunday social routine" from 11 to 12 noon.
 - b. False profession (v. 3a). The church's message: sin, grace, love, Savior. The church's business: preach the Gospel, administer the Sacraments, forgive and retain sins. Cf. "Office of the Keys." When God's business is pushed aside for suppers, fellowship, entertainment, social routine, this warning is needed.
 - c. Sin (v. 3b). "And repent." "All have sinned" (Rom. 3:23). "Dead in trespasses" (Eph. 2:1). All apart from God, as Prodigal Son (Luke 15:32ff.). Sin is basic cause of all evil, all dry rot, spiritual death. Sin leads to death, damnation, despair in hell. Not a pretty picture, a dying church.

II. *What makes a church a living, dynamic force for God?*

- A. Be watchful (v. 2). "Awake, thou that sleepest," awake from indolence, stupor. Heed the warning, "watch and pray" (Matt. 26:41). "Be sober, be vigilant . . ." (1 Peter 5:8). "Strengthen . . . things . . . remain" (v. 2). Be stirred to vigorous action before the "smoking flax" is quenched.
- B. Remember . . . hold fast (v. 3). Gospel heard and Sacraments received; redemption, reconciliation, offered in Word; peace, security, and hope are ours in Christ, our "great High Priest" (Heb. 4:14). "Hold fast." One thing needful.
- C. Repent (v. 3). No other way to God than that taken by penitent thief, Prodigal Son, publican. Some scientists call sin an "upward stumble in man's progress"; philosophers, "goodness in the mak-

ing"; sociologists, "disagreeable hindrance to the smooth ongoing of the social machinery"; psychologists, "egotistical abnormality" for which man is not responsible. No matter what they say, sin is still the curse of curses. Thank God, there is forgiveness! Sin's debt is paid by the crimson coin of Christ's blood; sin's darkness is dispelled by the "Light of the world"; sin's burden was shouldered by the "Lamb of God"; sin's poison was dissolved by the healing balm of the cross; sin's nakedness was covered by the "robe of Christ's righteousness" (1 Cor. 15:3; Rom. 5:20, 21; Is. 53:6).

Turn to Christ in faith. Without Him, no hope (John 14:6). With His help, as the faithful remnant in Sardis (vv. 4, 5), we shall walk with Him in white; shall be clothed in white raiment; our names will be written in the book of life, and with the angels we shall glorify and praise Him. As the other letters, this one closes with a plea (v. 6). The Word of God is all-important to a living church. It alone can replace dry rot with a dynamic faith which gives life today, tomorrow, and forever. So hear the Word; listen to the message of God; hold fast what He gives. Then it does not matter when (v. 3) Jesus comes "as a thief," or at what hour He might take us. We shall be ready. We shall be ready to live, and not to die.

Omaha, Nebr.

ELMER E. MUELLER

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

REVELATION 3:14-22

Churches are getting rich. Their buildings are big business. They work with the best techniques of mass media and public relations. They compete with the increase in population and plan their work like generals mapping out military campaigns. Is that the whole story?

What Is the Church That Is Truly Rich?

I. *It must be the church of Jesus Christ*

- A. The church, throughout the world or in a given place, consists of people who are attached by faith to Jesus Christ and by love to one another. Jesus is the "Beginning of the creation of God" and is Maker and Head of all things to the church, Author and Finisher of its faith and fellowship. Cf. Eph. 2:10; Heb. 12:1ff.
- B. The church in any given place consists of people in whom the Word of Christ is making its headway to the end that it pos-

sess and share forgiveness of sins through His redeeming work. He is "the faithful and true witness."

II. *It must be a church that is zealous*

A. The horror of lukewarmness.

This comes where a church says, "I have need of nothing." It is not a lukewarmness of not doing anything; an activist group threshing about with much busy-ness can be lukewarm in the sense of the text. It is not a lukewarmness of liberal or vapid beliefs; an orthodox church, serene in the possession of the truth, can be lukewarm. The horror of lukewarmness is that God spues the church out; it has ceased being a church, fed by the life of God and doing the business of God (v. 16).

B. The zeal that is essential:

1. Repenting (v. 19); possessing, and seeking to possess, the new, constantly renewed, mind of Christ Himself, and producing the "fruits meet for repentance."
2. Overcoming (v. 21). This implies conquest of lethargy and self-satisfaction and conquest over the trials of faith that come with persecution and the lure to the idolatries of the world.

III. *It must be a church that uses the way to zeal*

A. This begins with using God's prescriptions to reveal need.

1. The trial by fire (v. 18); the chastisement of God (v. 19). It is God's way of impressing: only God can give, guard, guide.
2. The discernment of need, "eyesalve" (v. 18), in terms of God's own judgment; the church must preach the Law to itself.

B. This continues with putting to work God's own fulfillment of need.

1. The recognition that even in chastisement God loves, and hence that it makes rich (v. 18, 19). Cf. Heb. 12:1-15.
2. Strengthening the righteousness in Christ, which is His gift through faith in the redeeming work of Christ; "white raiment" (v. 18; cf. 7:14) of those who have come through the tribulation. This means confronting Christ's redeeming work and seizing upon forgiveness in such a way that the

faith that justifies is sustained day by day; the church's program of Gospel and Sacrament.

C. This implies a continuing response to Christ's seeking.

1. The picture of v. 20 does not imply the Arminian or synergistic (William Holman Hunt, "The Light of the World," "The doorknob is on the inside") presumption that our response begins with ourselves.
2. But the heart of the picture is the knocking and the voice of Christ, which stirs the heart to the response. What does He say? "I will come in to him and will sup with him and he with me." He offers Himself as the food of life, Himself in His redeeming act. That not merely begins life, in conversion, but sustains it richly through every trial, out to "overcoming" (v. 21).

The church that is truly rich may not look rich in terms of plant, average annual income of its members, or size. But it will be unmistakable in the zeal with which its members seek to possess Christ and to be clothed in the treasure of His righteousness; and in which they keep the faith firm against every attack of idolatry. This will be the church that is doing the church's business of sustaining life in its people and offering it to those without.

St. Louis, Mo.

RICHARD R. CAEMMERER

THANKSGIVING DAY

1 TIMOTHY 6:6-10

Thanksgiving Day—a long-established American tradition. "A good thing" in the estimation of most Americans. Christians certainly affirm the intention of the day. We must recognize, however, that a general day of Thanksgiving can be misleading. It can lead to the idea that thanksgiving is something within reach of the natural man. We Christians recognize that thanksgiving is a grace, a product of the Holy Spirit in the new man. For God to produce this finest flower of faith, He must remove many spiritual impediments in the human heart. We want to explore and discuss one of the most dangerous of these impediments today:

Christians Should Be Content in Order to Be Able to Thank God for His Gifts

I. *The Christian, as a godly man, will give thanks out of contentment*

- A. "Godliness" is man's response to God (v. 6). By grace, the Christian has become a "godly" man in this sense. Mated to

his piety is one virtue which is the soil from which many other virtues grow — contentment. The Greek word for contentment is the one which the Stoics made famous as their ideal. It implies an inner freedom over all external circumstances as a result of a concentration on things that really matter. When this is experienced in the Christian's life, it becomes the source of a glorious existence and brings "great gain," the gain of a sanctified, Spirit-filled character.

- B. The contented man, the free man, will really be able to give thanks. He will not be inhibited from thanksgiving by any statistical view of blessings. He does not have to count his many blessings one by one. If he has food and clothing (v. 8), he has enough, and he gives God thanks for everything. (Contrast this man with the many who cannot figure out why they should give thanks.) The really free man, the contented man, by being freed from overconcern with the things of this life, is in the only position to give thanks for all things. Everything becomes a gift of God, not only the "extras."
- C. In reality this approach to material things is the only sensible one, for we cannot take it with us (v. 7). Naked we were born, naked we shall return (Job). "There are no pockets in a shroud." Why, then, strain to heap up things which do not last anyhow? (Hymn 425:3.)

II. *The Christian experiences the problem of discontent*

- A. Despite the clarity of the goal, to give thanks out of a contented heart, Christians often evidence a lack of thanksgiving because they are afflicted by discontent. Contrast the number of things we murmur about with the things we give thanks for. We want "more." Our materialistic age parades a whole host of gadgets, trinkets, and the like, which we want to have, which other people acquire, for which we envy them. And so "we would be rich" (v. 9).
- B. This is a trap of the devil (v. 9b). When people are seized by greed and covetousness (discontent in the acute stages), they will do anything to attain a gratification of their desires (v. 9b). In fact, the apostle is willing to say that the "love of money is the root of all evil" (v. 10a). All kinds of sins grow out of a desire for money which we want to use for the things we love. The moral danger of discontent is grave.

C. Unchecked, discontent can lead to destruction and perdition (v.9c). Why? Because it causes men to wander from the faith (v.10b). By causing one to lose sight of God in the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom alone there is salvation, the love of money, the reaching after it, brings about eternal ruin. This is the frightful prospect to which our discontent can lead us.

III. *Christians will look to Christ to free them from the sin discontent*

A. Where can we go for help to develop the contented and free heart, which is the soil of true thanksgiving? Where but to the Lord Jesus, who has promised to make us truly free. We open our hearts to God when we confess our sins of discontent and thanklessness and turn to God's offers of forgiveness in the Lord Jesus. In Christ we learn what is truly of value, of abiding importance—the love of God. This frees us from an attachment to things of this earth.

B. Christ can free us from bondage because He came to destroy the work of the devil. He did this by making atonement on the cross for all sins, thereby canceling the power of the Evil One to accuse us. His life and death make up the one mighty act of God by which true freedom came. He who by faith gives himself to God in trust shares in this freedom.

Therefore we can truly give thanks today. No one who has been freed by the liberating act of God in Christ can labor in a bondage to earthly things. No one can hesitate in his thanksgivings because he can count only a few blessings. We have been given a life in God. All that we receive is a wonderful gift of God. Truly, "godliness with contentment is great gain," and the gain is this that we thank God for everything.

Yonkers, N. Y.

RICHARD KOENIG