

"The Gifts of God" Numbers 21:4-9 Rogate 2022

In Exodus twenty, God commanded the people of Israel not to make graven images. Yet when He commanded the building of His tabernacle, He told them to make it with carved shapes, including golden cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant. Then again in our text in Numbers 21, He commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent, a graven image.

Not all images are the same. The difference is what is done with the image. In Exodus twenty, after He said, "Do not make graven images," He also went on to say, "You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I, the Lord your God am a jealous God." So it is not merely the making of a carved image that is sinful, but when such a statue or image is worshiped.

We also see this distinction in the bronze serpent. Later in the Bible, some people kept this bronze serpent that Moses made and worshiped it. Even though it was not a bad sculpture in the first place, later it became a stumbling block because they misused it.

Any gift God gives can be misused. All sins could be defined as misuse of God's gifts. He gives us His Name, but to misuse that Name breaks the Second Commandment. He gives His Word, but to fail to hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it is to break the Third

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Commandment. He gives parents and other authorities, but to fail to honor them breaks the Fourth; and so forth.

The same with this bronze serpent. It was a wonderful gift of God. Those bitten by the poisonous serpents could look to the statue of a snake and be saved from death. How wonderful and miraculous! Yet to misuse the serpent sculpture by worshiping it was a great evil.

The difference was to use it the way God instructed. His instructions with the bronze serpent were clear: "Look here and you will not die." Here is an instruction, followed by a promise.

What if people said, "We believe the promise, but we will not look at the serpent." What foolishness! God promised to give His gift if people listened to His instructions. They was not difficult.

The instructions located the gift and promise in a particular place. You could not make your own bronze serpent, but had to look at the one Moses made. If you were in the wrong part of the camp, you would have to get to the serpent somehow, perhaps by being carried if you were too weak from snake poison. Or perhaps Moses had the pole with the bronze serpent carried through the camp so that as many people as possible could catch a glimpse of that sign of salvation.

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But if you refused to go, or refused to look, then the serpent did not benefit you. The gift was located in a specific object in a specific place.

In the same way, God has given us great gifts and promises, but located them in specific objects and places. He puts the grace of Christ in water. He puts the Body and Blood in bread and wine. He puts salvation in His Word.

Shall we avoid these gifts? Shall we refuse to receive them? Shall we use God's gifts but in a bad manner? For example, should we get Baptized and then say, "I can do whatever I want because I am forgiven"? Heaven forbid!

Shall we look to His gifts, but only occasionally? This would be like a person who was bitten by a snake, but said, "I will go look at the bronze serpent soon, but I'm busy right now. I'll get around to it later."

The visible signs God has given are life and salvation. We should not be rationing them out, as if receiving too much is a bad thing. Instead we should urgently go to them, as if we were dying of poison without them.

We have a far deadlier venom in our veins than merely snake poison. We have a sinful old Adam, and with it, death. This death is fully deserved by each one of us. None of us can claim to be an

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innocent victim. We brought this upon ourselves by every act of mistrust towards God.

That is what complaining is. The Israelites griped that there was no food (which was a lie), and then they grumbled about the poor quality of the food. But the food was manna from heaven. The Lord God created a thing that had not been before nor has been since to preserve His people. But they found a way to complain.

We find ways to complain. An obvious one is that we do not like the physical element of bread in the Supper. You know, it's not the most delicious food ever created by man. In taste it is somewhere between bread and paper. Or the wine. There are many kinds of wine, and whatever we use, some people will dislike it. If this is not to your taste, then you may be tempted to complain.

But we must be very careful. Whatever the taste of the earthly element, God is providing for us a food and drink of unequalled worth. He created a holy meal that is an infinite treasure for His Church. Here is the Body and Blood of the Son of God, given for us Christians to eat and drink for the forgiveness of our sins. And where there is forgiveness, there is also life and salvation.

The physical element in itself may not be the greatest. But that should never cause us to complain, or worse yet, refuse to receive it.

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Instead we should learn to love these elements because of the precious gifts they deliver.

For through this gift the promise of Christ is given. The benefits of His work come to us in His Sacrament. His work is that He was hung upon a Cross to save us from sin and death. He let Himself be cast in the shape of sinful flesh. He became sin for us, because He carried all the sins of the world. He did all this so that you could look to Him in faith and be saved.

But the looking of faith is not only in your heart. We receive the gifts He gives in the physical signs. We receive Baptism, and we hear the Word, and we are absolved, and we eat the Meal. In all these things is the antidote to the poison of death that our sins have earned.

If we despise the signs He gives, then we despise Christ. Of course, no one says that they despise Christ. But when they avoid His House, they despise Him. When they are found less and less where His Word is, they despise Him. When they do not think that these things are sacred and vital, then they despise Him.

Everyone who does so has an excuse. Everyone has some complaint that they think is a good reason to despise the good gifts of God. But in reality, there are no good excuses.

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Each of us, at some time, has despised these things. We have all resisted Him in some ways because of our complaining flesh. By God's grace, He brings us to repentance, and He brings us to look at His Son. He draws us, in spite of ourselves, to receive His gifts in faith.

Let us pray the Lord that He be merciful and patient with us until He brings us at last to His promised land. Amen.