

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Midweek Lent Service – March 24th, 2010

Colossians 2:13-15

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Dear children who have been rescued from eternal darkness and destruction. Amen

How do most people define *death*? A flat line on a hospital monitor? An EKG or EEG that registers no heart activity or brainwaves? A lifeless body in a casket? Since the unbelieving world sees no meaning beyond their narrow existence from cradle to grave, physical death is the end of everything for which they lived.

Some years ago, a man approached a pastor and pointed out an apparent contradiction in the Bible: “When God told Adam not to eat of the forbidden fruit, he said, ‘The day you eat of it you will surely die.’ Adam ate from it. But he didn’t die on the day he ate it. In fact, he didn’t die for another 900 years! So the Bible is obviously wrong.” The pastor then pointed out that Adam did, indeed, die on the very day he took the forbidden fruit. But it was a much more horrible death than mere physical death. As soon as Adam desired to be like God, he died to God. Adam’s newfound perversion called the bad tree, good, and God’s good command, bad. That inward death led to the actual sin of reaching out and taking the forbidden fruit. Adam’s death was also seen when he was terrified to be in the presence of God. That is why he hid in the garden. Furthermore, man and woman covered their nakedness because they knew how their sin-darkened hearts were capable of abusing God’s good gifts. All of these were signs of inner death. To be sure, physical death and everlasting death in hell would follow. It is this downward spiral of death that our Savior suffered and died to reverse. It is this very thought that is addressed by our theme for this year’s Lenten series:

Sermon Theme: We Preach Christ Crucified!

1. **No longer dead**
2. **But alive!**

To appreciate our new life in Christ, we must remember our original condition: **“When you were dead in your sins.”** As was the case with Adam, God identifies our sins as the outward symptom of soul death. Each time we lay claim to our right to do what God forbids, we imitate Adam in his rebellion and stand with him under God’s wrath.

How could we have known these sins, since the image of God was distorted by our fall into sin? The apostle mentions a **“written code, with its regulations.”** Perhaps the best summary of this written code is found in the Ten Commandments. How does God see us through them?

1. Do we fear the loss of money, love the possession of it, and trust that all is well if we have enough of it? Do we hold friendships, relatives, human intelligence, emotions, or our own wants higher than our Maker?
2. Have we misused God’s name? Do we use it to pray, to praise him to others, and to give thanks for his daily mercies? Do we thank him for our trials?
3. Do we come to church with the expectation that if we “sit on a board” for an hour, God owes us something? Or do we come more ready to listen than to offer the sacrifice of fools?
4. Do we honor our father and mother and all in authority—with hearts and tongues and hands eager to serve them?

5. We may not have been convicted of felony murder. But when we have seen our neighbor in need, have we ever crossed to the other side of the road and, in effect, said, “You can die for all we care”?
6. Have we always loved our spouses and kept ourselves pure of unholy desires?
7. One man can steal with his tongue as easily as another can with a gun. Have we ever laid claim to those things that are not rightfully ours? or desired them?
8. Have we ever relished telling a lie about someone? Or in telling the truth about someone, delighted in how it made us look larger by comparison?

How do our consciences measure up against God’s **“written code, with its regulations”**? It is no use comforting ourselves by saying, “Everybody’s doing it.” That ignores God’s holiness and justice which cannot permit anyone unholy into heaven. If sinners take perverse comfort in the company of other sinners, that only proves they are part of the mass of perdition we refer to as “the world.”

There is little comfort in the appearance of innocence. Even the apparent innocence of infancy is full of sin. Just because a baby cannot clench his fist or hasn’t mastered speech to the point where he can speak defiantly to his siblings doesn’t mean he is not self-absorbed and spiritually lifeless by nature before God. If death does not take us at the earliest stage of life, it surely will find us soon after we reach the century mark. The world may praise its own for their acts of charity. But without God’s pardon, these are only glittering vices. When charity is not done out of love for Christ, it is always in the interest of self-defense or self-promotion or both.

But the problem does not lie merely in what we have done wrong—or not done right. It goes much deeper. St. Paul further describes it as **“the uncircumcision of your sinful nature.”** Paul is trying to point out that even if we could live a good life, we have a bigger issue. The bigger issue is the sinful nature that we all have from birth. Just as the David confessed in Psalm 51:5, **“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”** In our confession of sin, we do not begin with what we have done wrong (as damnable as our sins are). We begin with who we *are*: “Merciful Father in heaven, *I am sinful from birth . . .*” Everywhere in Scripture God tells us that we are born dead in sin. This is the root problem of all our sin. In the midst of this living death, God breaks through and performs the miracle of resurrection.

“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.” For us, it is futile to plead with a deceased loved one to rise from her coffin. But God, who breathed the breath of life into lifeless clay and it became a living being, has breathed into the “walking dead” with the same result. Only now the breath that gives us life is the gospel of Christ crucified! The **“written code, with its regulations”** stands against us in the court of a holy, all-knowing and just God. Our consciences testify to what the verdict of the Almighty should rightfully be: “Guilty on all counts! Since you have declared independence from your Maker, leave him and go into outer darkness—forever!”

But the judge **“canceled the written code, with its regulations.”** How can that be? **“He took it away, nailing it to the cross.”** This is what Lent is all about! As we hear our dear Savior cry, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** (Mt 27:46), we know very well why. It was so that God would not forsake those whom he ought to forsake. The people of Israel complained against God’s grace and were bitten by venomous snakes. Many died. When they confessed the evil of their ways, God commanded Moses to lift up a bronze snake on a pole. Anyone who was bitten could look up to the bronze snake and, trusting in God’s promise, be saved from death. Even so, when Jesus was raised up on the cross, you and I, who were dead in sin, looked up in faith to Jesus on the cross and crossed over from death to spiritual life. The apostle says that the law code that was against us was nailed to the cross with Jesus. It was cancelled. It was taken out of the courtroom to some remote and desolate place where the judge could see it no longer. Therefore, we are declared not guilty.

But at what a cost! The Father’s unfathomable love paid a horrible price for our new life! Let me put it in terms a bit easier to understand. Not too long ago, a British soldier fighting in Afghanistan was

fighting the Taliban on the top of a building. The Taliban soldier threw a hand grenade on the roof right next to their commander. What do you do? It was too high to jump. The grenade would have certainly killed their commander and those soldiers around him. Without any thought for his own life, he grabbed the grenade and threw it off the building. The grenade exploded shortly after he threw it and the soldier and his commander both suffered wounds. But his selfless act of love certainly saved both of their lives.

God in love saw that we had more than a grenade close to us. We had the condemnation of spending eternity in the fires of hell. Jesus took the “grenade” of our sin and guilt and took it with himself to the cross. The difference is that he endured more than some superficial wounds. Jesus endured the very pains of hell and the physical suffering that we deserved. That is true love. That is the love that saved us from a certain death. That God’s Son willingly went to his death an innocent man is amazing grace!

“And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” Here St. Paul recalls a victory parade after a Roman military campaign. The streets of the victors would be filled with cheering spectators. Garlands of flowers would be placed around the necks of the general and other officials. Loud cheers and the smell of incense would fill the air. The enemy soldiers would be stripped, bound, and marched down Main Street prodded by the victors’ spears. They were a public laughingstock. Finally, at the end of the march, the enemy soldiers were put to death.

Christ crucified stripped our enemies of their armor when he brought us from death to life. The devil only speaks the truth when he can give us an evil conscience: “You are a sinner. And God cannot let sinners into heaven.” But Jesus disarmed the powers of darkness when he died innocently. He prayed from the cross that God would forgive his enemies. How could the Father deny the prayer of the only One who did not deserve to die? In that act, the great accuser is stripped of his accusation and, therefore, his deadliest weapon.

Furthermore, Jesus’ cross made a public spectacle of all our spiritual enemies as well. At the hour of his death, there was an earthquake that opened the graves of many of the saints that had died earlier. They came out of their graves. Alive! This was a prelude to the fact that those who held us captive were no longer our captors. Three days later we would see this more clearly when Jesus’ body would rise without seeing decay. On the Last Day, we will see the ultimate result of “captivity being taken captive” when all who have crossed over from death to life will arise to the new paradise, the home of righteousness.

And this new life in Christ does stop the minute we are made alive. Life never does. Christ made us alive so that we could be living sacrifices to him. To the apostles this new life meant spending themselves in God’s service, even to the point of shedding their blood. In the same way, it is natural for us to live out our calling in meaningful activity for his kingdom. When we open our mouths, we strive to have the world hear Jesus’ voice. Our hands are used for works of mercy to those who live around us. It is our prayer that they may behold the merciful acts of Christ in our works. And may we always support our missions around the world as the gospel reaches far beyond our community and country. All of this is ours because of Christ crucified, who has taken us from death to life! Amen.