



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 & St. Luke 18:9-14

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As I thought this past week about today's lessons I couldn't help also thinking about several conversations I've had recently. Last week I was talking with a fellow believer about the fact that some of her family members were turned off of the Church because of the Gospel's clear teaching that Jesus is the only way to God. "How do you help people to understand why Jesus is the *only* way?" she asked me. Not more than a few days earlier I had a similar conversation with a man who isn't a Christian. He asked me, "Your church isn't one of those ones that thinks it's the only way to God, is it?" We've all heard that kind of objection at some point from someone. He told me that the purpose of "church" was to teach people how to be good—and he didn't need to go because he was already "good enough".

I asked him how good is "good enough". He said, "Well, obviously nobody's perfect; you just have to be *generally* good." He also threw out another common line: "You know, as long as you're really sincere and well-meaning you'll be okay with God." Friends, the Bible doesn't teach that. Jesus said that *no* man is good. St. Paul says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." He also tells us that the "wages of sin is death."

Sadly, it's not just people out in the world who have these wrong ideas about Jesus or about their own righteousness. Next week I'm headed to Washington, D.C. to take part in a conference on growing healthy churches. I received the document packed from the conference folks this past week and was reading through the material. There was quite a bit of information on how the hosting church went about "cleaning up the rolls". When the current pastor took over there were numerous people on the rolls who had moved away, who weren't attending, and

even some who had died. But his biggest concern was for those people in the congregation who were part of the church's life, but whom he realised had never truly come to an understanding of what the Gospel is and what it actually means for us. He had started interviewing *prospective* church members to make sure they were actually Christians and that they actually knew and understood the Gospel, but he realised that there were quite a few people *already* in the church who didn't understand the Gospel. So he started going down the church membership roll and did what he calls "reverse membership interviews" with everyone—making sure that the Gospel was shared with everyone and that everyone understood it and what it means. All because even in the Church, even after years of hearing sermons preached and even after years of reading the Bible, there are lots of people who don't understand that Jesus is unique and who still think that it's all just about being "good enough".

None of this, of course, is a new problem. We'll get to the Gospel lesson in a bit, but the Pharisee in it who thanked God that he was such a good man and not a lowly sinner like the tax-collector was one of those people who thought it was all about being "good enough", and the Christians to whom St. Paul ministered dealt with the same problem too. So in our Epistle today from First Corinthians, Paul does something that we need to do every once in a while: he goes back to the basics of the Gospel. Look at 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

Paul sums up the most essential parts of the Gospel message—the Good News. And notice he says: This is the message that he preached—a message that not only came from God and was divinely inspired, but was also based on the events that the disciples of Jesus—hundreds of them—all witnessed first hand. This is the message on which we stand—the message in which

lies our salvation. We can try to stand on other things, like being "good enough", but those other things won't hold us up.

And when it comes to the Gospel message he says, "This is *of first importance*—it's what I received and it what I'm passing on to you now—and that's that Jesus Christ died for our sins, that he was dead, and that he was raised on the third day, all just as the Scriptures had predicted." There are other important aspects of the Gospel message, but these three things are the most important. If we don't get things right at this point, none of the rest matters.

First: "Christ died for our sins." The message isn't just that Christ died. If we stop there all we get is the message that nice guys lose in the end. No wonder everyone likes Jesus, but doesn't really want to imitate him when it really comes down to it. The issue is that Christ died *for our sins* and that he did it *in accordance with the Scriptures*. If we understand that "the wages of sin is death", this is the only place we can find hope: that Jesus died for our sins and that he did it in fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies. Paul doesn't start into a long description of the life of Christ. He doesn't say anything here about Jesus' miraculous birth or about his teaching ministry, just that he died and that his death was a payment for our sins. Jesus' life is important because it shows us that he was God and as God was the only one who could pay our debt, but the real Good News isn't just that God became incarnate as one of us and lived a perfect life. It's that God Incarnate—the only man who has ever fulfilled God's requirement of perfect righteousness—died in our place, earning the wages of our sin for himself. The Good News is that Christ's death accomplished something, that it has set us free from the entrapment of sin and has the power to change us. As St. Peter says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). Isaiah predicted it hundreds of years before and summed up the meaning of Christ's death too: "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). On that day that he died, Jesus dealt with our failures and our rebellion. On that day he gave us our hope.

If there was some other way than sending his own Son to die, don't you think that God would have done it? If it was just

about being “good enough” or just about being “sincere” in your beliefs, well, people had been doing that for thousands of years before Jesus ever came. If that worked, why send him? If that other stuff worked to restore people to God, to save them from death and hell and from their sins, why reinvent the wheel? And why do so in such a supremely costly way?

Because Jesus is the *only* solution. Those other things don’t work and never did work. And Jesus is the only solution because God—in addition to being perfectly loving and really, *really*, wanting us to be restored to his fellowship—is also perfectly holy and perfectly just. Remember, when we sin, we may be sinning against ourselves or against other people, but most importantly every sin we commit is also—and most importantly—against God. Even the smallest of our sins is a gigantic blot against the absolute purity of his holiness. It’s hard for us to grasp. We sin and most of the time we just think it’s not really that big of a deal. But, brothers and sisters, the reason why it doesn’t seem like a big deal is because we are sinful—we’re unholy—and it’s hard for us to even conceive of the indescribably purity of the perfect holiness of God. That’s why we can’t just make up for our sins by being good. None of us can be good enough; none of us can achieve perfection. Even if we committed only one “small” sin and were good for the rest of our lives, we’d still be falling short of *perfection*.

And God isn’t just perfectly holy; he’s also perfectly just. He can’t just give a wink and a nod to our sins and pretend they didn’t happen. If he did that he’d be being something other than he is—to wink at sin is impossible for God because it’s against his very nature. But despite our sins God still loves us. And so the only just way to satisfy his holiness was to pay the penalty for our sins himself. That’s why the only hope we have is in Jesus Christ. Only his blood, shed at the cross, can cover our sins that we might stand before God uncondemned.

This is why it’s blasphemous to think that we can find some other way to God. God gave up himself that we might be restored to his fellowship. The Father sent his Son to die the death that we deserve. And we say, “It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you’re sincere about it.” Um...no.

You might as well slap God in the face. We say, “I can be good enough on my own.” No, you can’t—that’s the whole point. If we could be good enough on our own, God wouldn’t have had to come to earth in Christ and fulfil his requirement of perfection and then die for us. Jesus is the only way.

The second thing that St. Paul says in his core summary of the Gospel is that Jesus was buried. It seems like a funny thing to add after saying he died. Isn’t it enough that he died? I think most people would probably assume that if he died he was then buried, but we don’t just read it here, we also recite it every time we say the Creed. This is important because the fact that Jesus was buried should serve well enough to defeat the argument of some who claimed that Jesus never really died—that he swooned or was just in a coma and woke up a couple of days later. The disciples who buried him knew he was stone dead—they embalmed him and put him in the tomb. They would have noticed him breathing or felt his heart beating while they were cleaning his body and wrapping it in linen. And if anyone would have been looking for those signs of life it would have been those same disciples and you can be sure that they wouldn’t have just left him in the tomb if they’d had any inkling that he was alive. If Jesus didn’t really die, then we have no hope; his burial shows that he really did die. It also roots his death in history. The death of Christ is an historical fact and the fact that he was placed in a physical tomb that we can still go and see roots the fact of his death into the real world.

Third, St. Paul says that “he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.” Jesus’ death is our only source of hope, but unless Jesus was who he claimed to be—unless he really was the Incarnate Second Person of the Trinity—his death was meaningless. So he didn’t just die, he was resurrected and in that he did something that only God could do. His resurrection was in fulfilment of all the Old Testament prophecies that said that the Messiah would die and then rise three days later. In his resurrection we have proof that Jesus’ death really does mean something and that he is who he claims to be, the Incarnate Son of the Father.

That’s the Gospel in a nutshell. Three facts: Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, and he rose again, all in fulfilment of Scripture. St. Paul then gives a list of witnesses who saw it all happen – and it’s not just an idle claim because, as he says, most of those witnesses were still alive and could verify his claim.

This is what we have been taught, what we have received, and on what we stand and by which we are saved, as he says in verse 1. St. Paul stood on this foundation and look how it changed his life:

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. (1 Corinthians 15:8-10)

This is where we see the Gospel of Grace. St. Paul knew that he was the last person deserving God’s salvation. In Paul we see a perfect example of how our sins offend God. He was almost like a religious serial killer. He went out on behalf of the Jewish religious authorities, tracked down Christians, and then brought them back to sham trials—before they were executed. When Stephen, the first Christian martyr was stoned, it was Paul who stood by and held everyone’s coats so that they could throw their rocks. His sins weren’t small ones. His sins weren’t the sorts of sins that we might think of as being only against himself or against other people. He was hunting down *God’s* people. And yet even someone as evil as Paul was loved by God. Even someone as evil as Paul was sought out by God for redemption and reconciliation. And even someone as evil as Paul could be restored to God’s fellowship and do great things for him. On the Damascus Road, as he was out to hunt down more Christians, the resurrected Christ appeared to Paul personally and taught him the truth of the Gospel. Paul’s life was changed forever by God’s grace. Look at this beautiful summary he gives of what grace does for us: “By the grace of God I am what I am.” God’s grace converted a Christ-hating man who hunted down Christians for the Jewish authorities to kill, and

turned him into the chief of the Apostles and the greatest theologian the Church has known. And notice that he doesn't make any claim that he was responsible for his greatness. He knew that without God he was just another sinful human being—in fact as he says elsewhere that he was “the chief of sinners”. St. Paul knew what we so often need to be reminded of: that God is the one who enables us to live new lives and to do good. It wasn't Paul's doing, it was all God's work in him by grace. When we do good and others praise us for it, we have no business taking credit for it. We need to give the credit to God, whose grace enables us to overcome our sinful nature and to do good.

In fact, this is the only attitude that allows us to accept God's grace. A person full of pride and his own perceived worth, a person who thinks that he's “good enough”, never comes to God asking for grace because as far as he can tell, he's doing well on his own and doesn't need it. Look at our Gospel lesson, which gives the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14)

The Pharisee could be just about anyone. We've all met this guy before. Some of us have been this guy. He comes before God, not in thankful humility, but to praise himself. He thanks God for his virtues—well, actually, he thanks God for the absence of certain evils in his behaviour. He comes before God to recite a litany of all the good he's done, completely oblivious to the wrong. He

thinks he's been “good enough”. He's talking to God, but this isn't prayer and he's totally clueless about the goodness that he utterly lacks. He has no interest in mercy or grace. As one Melville Scott put it, he has not because he asks not, he asks not because he wants not. He's not standing in grace.

The tax collector could be anyone too. The difference between him and the Pharisee is that he is desperate. He understands his need, because he understands his position before God. He knows his need so well that he is afraid even to stand before other men. He enters the church and he kneels in the back, not wanting anyone else to see him and he's so humble that he kneels back there and doesn't even dare to lift his eyes up toward the God he knows he has wronged and offended. His prayer is short. He knows that he can't impress God with his goodness, because he knows that he isn't good. He just kneels humbly before God and acknowledges his own sinfulness and asks for God's grace. As Jesus said, “everyone who asks receives,” and this man asked in humility and faith and we're told that he went home justified and exalted.

St. Paul understood that God's grace had made a change in his life, even though he knew that he was still a sinner and had a long way to go toward the perfection of Christ's example. He gave all the glory to God for the change in his life. He had once been the proud Pharisee of Jesus' parable, but one day he was brought down and had his perspective changed and became the humble tax-collector. The difference between the two was that one man understood a need that the other one was totally oblivious to.

Most, if not all, of all us—I hope—here today understand our sinfulness in the way that the humble tax-collector did. We came as humble sinners before God, asking that he be merciful to us because we know that we can never be “good enough”. But do we still pray daily for his grace? Once redeemed we have a tendency to fall back into the Pharisee's mindset and to forget that all the good we do is not really our good, it's only the result of God's grace working in us. We forget that we need God's grace and we try to live out our calling, relying on our own merits and abilities. Let us, like St.

Paul, always remember that it is God's grace working in us to live the Christian life. And let us, as we prayed in our collect, ask God for a greater measure of his grace, knowing that without that grace, there is no way we can live out the new lives we've been given and fulfil our duty to God as we live in his love.

Please pray with me. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your grace. St. Paul acknowledge that he was the chief of sinners. The fact is that even the best of us here isn't far behind him. There isn't one of us who isn't deserving of eternal death for our sins. And yet none of us is outside of your amazing love. You sent your own Son to die on our behalf that by trusting in him we might experience your amazing grace. Father, let us never take that grace for granted. Let us never forget the grounds of our redemption. Let us never become like the Pharisee who thought he was “good enough”. Let us stand on your grace each and every day, trusting in the saving work of Jesus at the cross and growing us in holiness as we await the Last Day. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our gracious Saviour. Amen.