

Dead to Sin, Alive to God

Text: Romans 6:3-11

Hymn: "All Mankind Fell in Adam's Fall" (*LSB* 562)

What's this? Jesus paying a compliment to the Pharisees? A few weeks ago, we heard Jesus blast the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites. Today we hear Him holding them up as a kind of standard..."Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:20). What is going on? We'll get to that. For now just keep that in the back of your mind as we consider St. Paul's words from Romans 6.

In chapter 5, Paul described how through faith in Christ we have peace with God. We are reconciled to God. Since Adam, transgression has been the name of the game in all the world and in all our lives. But where transgression and iniquity increased, God's grace abounded all the more. Jesus, the second Adam, took all our sin on Himself so where sin reigned in death, grace might also reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

What shall we say then? If this is how it works, are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? This has always been the accusation against the preaching of the Gospel, that what you're really saying is that sin doesn't matter. Because the more you sin, the more God forgives, and everybody's happy. Carry on as before. And there's no transformation of life. But transformation of life is precisely the point! Our lives were contrary to God's will and therefore contrary to the *purposes* of God's will, but the whole purpose of salvation is to bring about life and human flourishing in God's presence.

One of the things the Gospel does in fact is transform our lives from fighting against God to walking with God. From ignoring God to listening to God. From disobedience to God to obedience to God. The point is that we are baptized. And when we were baptized into Christ's death it was so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness, not eventually, not some day in heaven, but already now.

"You also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." No longer making excuses for your disobedience. No longer ignoring the conflict and discrepancy between your desires and God's desires. Instead, hearing and heeding the Word of God.

And it's in *that* project that everybody's a winner. Because *God* is pleased when we do His pleasure. *Our neighbors* have a much nicer time when we serve them in love. And *we* are blessed. Not only because God's law brings with it its own rewards of peace and joy now, but God promises to remember our works into the life to come!

Now when we bring our lives to that point, when our lives are really governed by God's word in that way, we can say that we have become Pharisaical. We become Pharisees. Our lives are righteous. They ought to become more and more so each day as we heed and apply God's Word to our lives, as we repent of our sins and hear again and again God's call.

But Pharisaical righteousness, that external righteousness of godly, clean living is not sufficient to enter the kingdom of God. It is a description of life *within* the kingdom of God. But no amount of clean living, no amount of being a good neighbor, no amount of controlling our urges to sin with the help of the Holy Spirit is going to overcome one fundamental problem.

Now Jesus did compliment the Pharisees—backhandedly—for being clean on the outside. Nobody should argue against that. There is no shame in having a clean life. And I want to stress this point, because it's become fashionable in recent times, at least in certain circles, to glorify a murky past or a broken life. to promote in one way or another the idea that to have had a disgraceful life or to have had a great fall from grace and to have lots of terrible stories about your sinful past to tell is actually a great thing, Why? Because then you can proclaim all the more how gracious God has been to you. A friend remembers how there was a “scared straight” kind of assembly at his Christian high school, where a recovered drug addict came and talked about all the horrors of his former way of life and then described the joy and contentment that came from hearing the Gospel and living as a child of God. My friend said that the presentation made him envious, because he himself had lived such an uninteresting life by comparison and he said as much to the speaker afterwards. And the man looked at him and said, “Don't ever wish to have been so lost as I was. Not to have a murky past, not to have an interesting story to tell about some terrible fall from grace is a gift of God and you should cherish it.” There is nothing glorious about our sin. The only glory is when God rescues us from our sin. And if he rescues us preventatively, as it were, all the better.

But the problem with the Pharisees was on the inside. White-washed tombs Jesus called them. Outside: clean, nice, freshly painted. Inside: filthy, nasty, rotting corpses. However much you apply yourself, strive, and struggle, you cannot change what you are. This is why in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus goes on to explain exactly what this righteousness looks like. Today we got just just the first section, on the fifth commandment. You shall not murder. Haven't killed anybody? Well done. As far as

your life on earth is concerned, you have fulfilled the law. But God sees all of you. And you have not loved God with all your heart if you have been angry or disrespectful in your heart towards your neighbor.

But Jesus goes on to the sixth commandment. You've been faithful to your wife? Good. Your wife is really pleased if you haven't strayed but God's law is not thereby satisfied. On the contrary, anyone who has ever lusted has already committed adultery in his heart. Oaths. Don't swear falsely but do whatever you promise. And Jesus goes further: Don't speak in such a way that whenever you promise something, you reserve the right to change your mind. Let your "yes" be "yes" and your "no" be "no." Anything more than this comes from evil.

Don't just love your neighbors, love your enemies. Bless those who persecute you. Don't refuse the one who would borrow from you. In short, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. That's what God's law demands. For that no amount of external righteousness in your life is going to do the job. Because we are what we are. And you are all very lovely—and I'm not just saying that because I can't see half of your face—but *none* of you is perfect.

And for that reason Christ came. He didn't come simply to instruct us in the law so that we might be better at fulfilling it. But he came to rescue us from the condemnation of the law. He came to clean the inside. He came to remove the heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh. That's something only He can do. And that is why the true righteousness by which we enter into the kingdom of heaven, the righteousness that is able to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees is the one that deals with the inside as well as the outside, that removes transgression, that takes away

guilt, and replaces self serving and self seeking with faith in Christ, love for God, and love for the neighbor. These are gifts of the Holy Spirit, which we receive through faith in Christ. We were baptized into His death and there our sinful nature was killed and the accusation of our sin was taken away and we were raised to new life by the power of Christ. And unless we have the life of Christ, which is given to us as a gift, we have no chance of entering the kingdom of heaven.

But in baptism we are joined to Christ's sacrifice, our sins are forgiven, and we are given that transforming, new life. Whoever believes in Christ clings to that hope. And when you by God's grace work hard to apply God's Word to your life, trusting God and serving your neighbor, you don't need to do it glancing over the shoulder all the time wondering, Am I doing it well enough? Am I managing to keep up the improvement rate at an acceptable level? Will I be dropped from the team? You don't have to do any of that because your righteousness before God depends on one thing and one thing only: the faithfulness of Christ. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved!

Note that Jesus says, "Whoever relaxes the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be"...kicked out? Barred from entrance? No, but "will be called least in the kingdom of kingdom." Your place in the kingdom of heaven ultimately doesn't depend on your fastidiousness. You should be fastidious. And if you are, you'll be called great in the kingdom! But what really matters, the life-or-death distinction, is whether you are in the kingdom, least or greatest.

What we need above all is the renewal of our hearts by God's Holy Spirit as a gift of Christ. The more we receive from Him, the more we are filled by him. The more we are filled by him, the more He will transform us. As we hear more and more we will

learn more and more. And one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is to make us sensitive to sin. If you're striving against sin, you're going to find more of it. But that's only because you're now looking harder. That too is a gift of God.

But none of you need ever despair over your sin: you know that it's sin but, more importantly, you know who your Savior is. Christ says that He has fulfilled the law. And so the law has really been fulfilled for you. As you remain in Him, He remains in you. And where He is, there is only forgiveness, life, and salvation.

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