June 16, 2013
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Father’s Day
9:30 am
Living Hope Lutheran Church

Sermon Theme: I NO LONGER LIVE, BUT CHRIST LIVES IN ME!

Galatians 2:15-21, 3:10-14

15“We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified. 17“If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! 18If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. 19For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 20I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

10All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” 11Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.” 12The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, “The man who does these things will live by them.” 13Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.” 14He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.
One has to wonder when St. Paul first spoke words like these from his letter to the churches scattered throughout the Roman province of Galatia. Paul’s words stand out as some of the most compelling and humbling words ever heard. Like everything Paul put down in sacred Scripture, they are words that could only have been given to him by God. Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” How many authors, how many poets, would love to be able to say after years of agonizing over just the right words or searching for just the right turn of phrase that they’d written something so deeply compelling? Crucified with Christ,

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This mighty word of God given to the churches in Galatia was embedded deep within Paul’s soul. Was it something he first learned from Ananias, God’s appointed messenger whom He dispatched to the house of Judas on Straight Street in Damascus? That’s where Saul—the former persecutor of the Church—was lying in bed; blinded by the light of God’s presence along the road but not deaf to the transforming truths that Ananias would share with him. God’s Spirit was at work in his freshly humbled heart! How wonderful it was for him when Ananias placed his hands on his eyes, restoring his sight and then baptizing him into Christ by applying water in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit! Saul died in his baptism. He’d been crucified with Christ. He no longer lived, but Christ now lived in him by the power of the Spirit! His new calling as God’s “Apostle to the Gentiles” had begun—and the world would never be the same!

Jesus’ death for us is everything we need for the forgiveness of our sins! His death paid the penalty for our rebellion and the price of our pardon. The Father’s wrath is satisfied in His Son’s cross, and we’ve been set free from the oppression of guilt’s unbearable burden. The story of the Christian life starts with forgiveness, but it doesn’t end there. Paul writes, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” The life we live by faith in Christ is an exchanged life. Everything that we were went with Jesus on the cross; everything that He is was raised from the tomb and is given to us as a free gift of God’s amazing grace! When God’s Spirit caused us to trust in Jesus as our Savior, sin lost its power over us, Satan was forced to cede his dominion, and the sting of death vanished in the hope of the resurrection to eternal life! We also gained the life of the everlasting Son of the living God with all its power and privileges. What an exchange!

But the sad truth about this exchange—and it’s really the only sad thing about it—is that we’re forgetful creatures. We’re creatures of our old, entrenched, rebellious habits. We love the fact that Christ put us at peace with God at the cross, but all too often we fail to live in the power of the resurrection. Our old natures want to ignore the death certificate. Their demise, if you will, is a legal fact but not a biological reality—not yet. They remind us of what we were before the cross. And we listen. We listen to Satan’s lies and to the siren call of the world’s temptations.
We doubt and worry, fuss and fret, lust and lie, covet and curse. We fail to reach out in love to the lost and the hurting and to invest the time, energy and effort it takes to have real, genuine, meaningful relationships within our families, with our next-door neighbors and our co-workers and here at church. While we might take offense at that frank portrayal, it clearly proves that we’re “lawbreakers” too; it establishes the sobering truth that “no one” of us “is justified by observing the law.”

Martin Luther wrote on this section of Scripture, “How can those who are justified in Christ not be sinners and yet be sinners at the same time? For the Scriptures asserts both conditions about the person who is justified. John writes in 1 John 1:8, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. [Yet] he also writes in 1 John 5:18, “We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin.” John is saying that believers don’t sin. But if they were to claim they had no sin, they would be lying.” Luther concludes, “If we look to faith [in Christ], God’s laws are fulfilled, sin is destroyed and no law is left. But if we look to our sinful nature, there is nothing good. Therefore, we must always remember that all of us who are righteous through faith are still sinners.” Luther often used the Latin expression, simul justus et peccator to describe the believer. It means, “at the same time saint and sinner.” As long as we live here on earth, those two natures—the old and the new—will continue their tug-of-war within us. Who will win?

That all depends on whose voice we listen to. It depends on whether or not we forearm ourselves with the tools of the trade: with prayer in the face of temptation and with the same “sword of the Spirit” that Jesus wielded in the wilderness when Satan came calling. Three times He replied to the devil’s enticements, “It is written.” If Jesus—the Word of God incarnate—relied on the written Scriptures to defeat our fiercest foe, who do we think we are and what do we thing we’re doing when we try to do battle with him by relying on our own weak willpower? We will never, ever win those skirmishes that way!

But we will gain the victory over temptation if we listen to the voice of our dear Savior and follow His example, not relying on our own power, but on the power of His Spirit who lives in us—the Spirit of the living God! What a marvelous thing that we can each confess with Paul: “For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” In Christ, and by the power of His indwelling Spirit, we can approach each new day with the confidence that no matter what it brings, we’ll be equipped to handle it. That doesn’t mean that sad news won’t arrive on our doorstep or that nothing will threaten to shake our confidence in God and His promises. Nor are we naïve to believe, as some Christians do, that once God’s Spirit lives in us we’ll never succumb to temptation again. If that was the case, we wouldn’t need Jesus to serve as our ever-living Lord and Savior.
To that end, Paul wrote to his fellow-Jews who thought they could be justified before God by the way they lived their lives: “All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.’ Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, ‘The righteous will live by faith.’ The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, ‘The man who does these things will live by them.’” Three times Paul quotes the Hebrew Scriptures in order to clarify to his critics that his teaching on this topic is in total agreement with God’s Word. He’s telling his countrymen: “Go ahead, rely on the law for your salvation. But know this: you have to keep it perfectly—each and every moment of your life from birth to death—in order to be saved. Otherwise, you’ll be condemned to spend eternity in hell.” On that note, the Apostle James wrote, “Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it” (2:10).

How refreshing, then, for them and for us again today to hear the glorious good news that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.” What a life-changing message the gospel is! It’s a transforming, liberating word that puts our souls at rest. We have it so good in Christ! So good! The question is, who am I going to share my faith with in the week ahead? How will I practice what I preach? Whose life can I bless today, tomorrow and for eternity as I introduce—or reintroduce—them to Jesus, “the Son of God, who loved [them] and gave himself for [them]”? Friends, don’t “set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” Amen.