

Sermon: Nailing Our Past to the Cross
Colossians 2:6-15

Col. 2:6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Col. 2:8 See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. 11 In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; 12 when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, 14 erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

PROBATION

Can you imagine what it would be like to have a criminal record? Everywhere you go people would reject you because of your past.

You would find it difficult if not impossible to get a job. You would be required to report to parole officer on a regular basis. Where you live and what you are able to do might be restricted as well.

It is no wonder that many criminals often return to jail. Their options are severely restricted by the sins of their past.

I assume that most of us here today don't have that problem. We don't have a criminal record. We're not on parole.

CAPTIVE TO PAST SINS

But, all of us to some extent are held captive by our past sins.

All of us feel guilty about a poor decision that we made. Perhaps we hurt a person we loved. Maybe we failed to do the right thing at a critical time.

We might not think about it all the time, but from time to time those feelings of inadequacy and shame come back strong. We are reminded of our failures, and it prevents us from living the kind of life that we want to live today.

We spend way too much time trying to make excuses and somehow justify our bad behavior.

What can we do about with these feelings of guilt and shame? How can we prevent the sins of the past from ruining our future?

Well, on our own we can't do anything. The Bible tells us that we are in bondage to sin. It is like each and every one of us is on parole. The historical effects of our sin restrict our lives. Paul describes it as being "dead" in our trespasses.

If someone is dead they don't need a good therapist. They need a resurrection! They need a Savior.

SIN SICK

One of the things that prevent all of us from obtaining the kind of help that we need is that we want to deny that we are sick, sin-sick.

A friend and fellow pastor, David Swanson tells of a time when his family was struggling with an outbreak of strep throat. Over a four-week period each of his children got strep not once but twice. They would take their medicine and get better but within days they would be sick again.

To make matters worse even his wife came down with the disease. He said that he was frustrated by having to do everything in the household. As he drove his children to the doctor yet again he thought, “What a bunch of weaklings I live with.”

As he sat in the waiting room the doctor came out and asked my friend, “Have you been tested for strep?” My friend replied, “No, why would I do that?”

The doctor replied, “Well, you may be the one infecting everyone else. Sometimes you can have strep but not have symptoms. It can be quite dangerous.” (For a good discussion of sin and its cure, you might want to read David Swanson’s new book, *Vital Signs*.)

My buddy, like most men didn’t want to admit that he was the sick one in the family, but his wife wore

him down. When he went back to the doctor and had the test he found out the truth. He was sick. He was the one who had been infecting his family.

This story reminds me of something that Jesus once told the religious leaders of Israel. They were criticizing Jesus because he was eating with tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus replied, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

What the religious leaders didn't recognize was that they also were in need of a physician. In fact sometimes the so-called “good people” need more help than anyone else. I still love that phrase from Mark Twain when he described a man who was a “good man in the worst sense of the word.”

Some of the worst sinners are the ones who think they're pretty good. History is filled with examples of people who committed terrible atrocities in the name of God.

How could this happen? It happened because these people did not understand their own sinfulness. They

were in need of a physician, but they didn't know it. So their sin-sick ways brought misery to many others.

CAPTIVE TO FALSE THEOLOGY

In our lesson for today Paul warns the Colossians not to let anyone "take them captive through philosophy and empty deceit".

We can only guess at what the philosophies may have been that threatened the Colossians.

But, we don't have to guess at the philosophies that threaten to take us captive today. Many of the deceitful philosophies of our day have a common theme. They state, "We're not the problem. It's those other people. They're the problem."

In other words blame the problem on someone else. We have been taken captive by the idea that it's always someone else's fault. And we buy into that idea because it's an idea that we want to believe.

Don't blame me the problems in my world are due to my parents, my children, my husband, my wife, the Republicans, the Democrats, the Conservatives, the Liberals, the white people, the black people, the rich people, the poor people ...

Take you pick when it comes to making excuses for your problems. The list just goes on and on. We can always find someone to blame.

But, the cure is not found in blaming someone else. The cure is found in recognizing that we are the ones who are sick.

Like my friend who had strep without obvious symptoms many of us are seriously sin-sick and don't know it. And if we are to avoid being taken captive by those who tell us that its not our fault ... that its someone else's fault ... we have to take a hard, realistic look at our own life.

What does the Bible say? We fall short. All of us have sinned and fall short. We fall short of the person God has called us to be.

The guilt and shame that we feel are not the result of a poor self-image. They are not just the result of someone laying a guilt trip on us. They are an accurate reflection of what is really going on in our lives. As long as we deny responsibility for our sins there is no cure.

But, when we admit our sin, when we say that our life is out of control and there is nothing that we can do about it, then we are ready to see the world through the eyes of grace.

BAPTISM AND NEW LIFE

Paul told the Colossians, “Yes, things were bad in your life. You were dead in your sins. You were without hope.

But, remember who you are and whose you are. Things have changed. You are no longer captive to the sins of the past and your fears about the future. When you were baptized the old way of life died and the new way of life began.”

The death and resurrection of Christ become a kind of metaphor for what happens in our life. Just as Jesus died and rose again so those who are filled with his Spirit die to the old way of life and rise to live in new way.

Think of all the ads on TV that promise a new way of life. Start eating this new diet food and soon you will be a different person. Drive this car and you will no longer be the awkward, shy person you are today. All

the girls will love you. Invest in this savings plan and become wealthy instead of poor.

Yesterday I saw an ad on TV that said if I bought a padded t-shirt my love handles wouldn't be so obvious. I would look like a new me. (Now there's an idea. It sounds easier than sit-ups!)

Many long for a new way of life. Many want to be reborn in some way. But, true rebirth is not the result of our effort. We may be able to remake ourselves physically ... for a while.

But, we cannot do anything about what really matters, our soul. We need to change from the inside out. And only God can do that.

Salvation comes only by grace through faith. God accepts us just as we are ... warts and all, and through the power of forgiveness God makes a new life possible.

You may have noticed that when I baptize a baby I always ask the child's parents, "What is her (or his) name?"

I don't do that because I have forgotten the child's name. I do that because when we are baptized, God

names us. We say, “Frank, child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit.”

In other words who we are is not determined by the world around us. Who we are is determined by the call of God. God has chosen us to be His children.

CIRCUMCISION

I think that’s why Paul compares baptism to circumcision in this passage. You may remember that circumcision was a sign of the covenant in the Old Testament. It was a sign that God’s people were special. God chose them for special service.

They were set apart. They were to be a sign of God’s grace to the world. They would be a light to the nations. They would be a holy people.

In the Promised Land they would be a people ruled by God’s law. They would offer justice to the powerless. They would offer a home to the homeless.

But, like us God’s people often failed to live up to their own ideals. The prophets in the Old Testament often condemn the faithless ways of the people.

Like us God's people were deeply flawed, and their inability to fulfill the law left them feeling profoundly dissatisfied. No matter how many sacrifices they made for their sins their guilt remained.

The prophet Micah wrote,

7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,

with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

The sacrificial system of the Old Testament had not produced what really mattered, righteous behavior. The prophet said, "No matter how many sacrifices you make nothing can make up for bad behavior. What God really wants are a people who are just and kind and humble."

It seems to me that we sometimes have the same problem in the church today. We have all kinds of activities and projects. But, why as the Apostle Paul

put it in his letter to the Romans, do we do the very things that we shouldn't be doing and we fail to do the things that we should be doing. It seems like we are doomed to spiritual failure. (Romans 7:14-20)

The problem is that we are living like people who still have to prove something. We are living like the criminal who is on probation. We believe that we have to prove ourselves righteous in the eyes of others. And that leads to bad behavior.

SIN NAILED TO THE CROSS

But, notice what our lesson for today says. God erased the record that stood against us. He set it aside. He nailed it to the cross.

When the Romans crucified people the person's crime was also nailed to the cross. If someone was a thief, a sign saying that was also nailed to the cross. If someone was a murderer, that crime was nailed to the cross. You may remember that when Jesus was crucified a sign was also nailed to his cross. It said, "The King of the Jews."

Paul says, "Imagine that this was not the only sign nailed to the cross. Think of the things that you have done wrong. Think of the sins that you have

committed. Imagine all those signs being nailed to the cross.”

That’s a picture of salvation. I don’t know what sinful sign you carry on you back this day. I don’t know what heavy load of guilt keeps you down and out.

But, you know.

Today I invite you to claim the promise of the gospel. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. In Jesus Christ our sins are nailed to the cross. In Jesus Christ our record is wiped clean.

We are no longer on probation. We no longer have to prove ourselves to be worthy. God in Christ has declared us worthy.

THE TRIUMPH OF GRACE

The concluding verses in our lesson for today give yet another picture of the triumph of grace.

When a Roman general would win a notable victory, he would march his armies through the streets of Rome. And behind this happy procession would

come the vanquished king and what remained of his army, stripped of their weapons and their pride.

In this way the Romans emphasized the completeness and finality of the victory. The whole world could see the power and might of Rome.

Paul said, “That’s the way you need to picture the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus. The old powers and authorities are no longer in charge. Jesus is a triumphant king and in procession behind him are the powers of evil... beaten forever ... for everyone to see.”

In today’s lesson we see the big picture of salvation. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus sin is forgiven and evil is defeated. Our job is to believe that and to live according to that hope.

Paul wrote in verses 6 and 7 of our lesson for today,

“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

Our lives need to be rooted and grounded in this gospel of grace. Every day we need to remember

these promises. And every day we need to give thanks that the failures of the past have been nailed to the cross and the everlasting hope of resurrection brightens our hope for the future.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

I want to close this morning by doing something shocking. I am going to change the order of worship! I am going to have a prayer of confession after the sermon!

There's a reason for that of course. Today we have been thinking together about how God forgives our sins and how that makes a new life possible. I want to give you some time to act upon that promise.

Think about some sin that has been nagging you for some time. Imagine that you are writing that sin down on a piece of paper. And then imagine that piece of paper being nailed to the cross.

You are now a free man or woman.

Let us live by that grace. Let us forgive others as God has forgiven us.

Let us pray.

Gracious God,
Like the Apostle Paul sins often seem to be getting the upper hand in our life. We do the wrong things and don't do the right things. It is so frustrating to know what is good and yet not be able to do it.

In the silence of this moment we remember our sins. Some of us have hurt the people we love the most. Some of us have failed to be compassionate to those who are struggling. Some of us have been filled with pride and are not able to see what we have done wrong, but we know that our life is not what it should be.

In the silence of this moment we name our sins.
(A time for silent confession)

And now dear Lord we remember the promise once again. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Our debt has been paid. The sins of the past have been nailed to the cross. You have given us our life back.

Fill us with your Spirit of grace. We ask it in the name of Jesus our Savior and Lord. Amen.