

“1st Pres: Our Identity”

Romans 6:1-11

- 1** What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?
2 By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?
3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?
4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.
5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.
6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin—
7because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.
8Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.
9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.
10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.
11 In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Introduction

Global warming seems to be on everyone's mind. Scientists run tests. Political candidates propose green policies. Hollywood organizing benefit concerts. Debate about how human activities affect the environment. From the fuel we burned on the way to church and the hair products we use, it's said that each of us leaves a "footprint" locally and perhaps wide ranging. Measure the natural gas usage, wattage settings, the mileage of your car, and you're well on your way to figuring out just how much "damage" you may be causing throughout the day.

This got me thinking about a more inconvenient truth — it's called *sin*. For every act of rebellion — every vicious word, every selfish act, every unhealthy state of mind — we press our footprint on the wide, growing path to our own spiritual destruction. Jesus said, "Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it."

The good news, of course, is that God left another kind of footprint. The Bible tells us about the One who walked before us, ushering in his new kingdom. By just one sure, historic step, the world will never quite be the same again. "But small is the gate and narrow

the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13-14),

Last Sunday we began a sermons series on things a congregation can do to keep itself alive, renewed, and growing in its life in a time of transition. Last week, Pastor Chris talked about the importance of the church’s history. First Pres of Salt Lake City has a rich 148-year history to reflect on and celebrate.

This week, it’s describing our identity; our identity as a Christian church. Simply put, my identity as a Christian is this: I’m a sinner saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Our identity as a church is this: we are a collection of sinners saved by that same grace.

One of my church history professors, Richard Lovelace wrote about “three aberrations, mistakes about grace, about the basis of salvation and life in Christ. The three are “cheap grace, legalism, and moralism.” And they appear at some time in some way in every church organization today.

Moralism is the approach to Christianity that concentrates solely on the teachings of Jesus as the moral imperative to be preached to or at society; that the point of the gospel is moral improvement. Is it good to be good? To do good things? Yes, of course. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. Others will see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” But if that’s our identity, if we think our good works qualify us as a Christian church or prove that you’re an authentic Christian, we’ve missed the gospel. Seminary President Albert Mohler said, “We are so easily seduced into believing that we actually *can* gain all the approval we need by our behavior.”

Legalism is similar as it puts law above gospel. It establishes requirements for salvation beyond repentance and faith in Jesus and reduces the message of God’s word to rigid codes of belief and conduct. Churches list disciplines, rules, and regulations designed to keep believers from anything that might hinder or mar spiritual progress; and certainly, to judge the lives and faith of others. Is it good to obey God’s commands? Yes, of course. But if that’s the basis for your standing with God, if you find your identity in your faithfulness and obedience, you’ve missed the gospel. Neither moralism nor legalism is the gospel of Jesus.

And then, there’s “cheap grace.” This phrase was written by pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer during the crisis of World War II. In his book “The Cost of

Discipleship,” cheap grace refers to the flippant attitude that says, “Hey, I’ve been forgiven and I will go on being forgiven whatever I do. So, I can do whatever I wish.”

Bonhoeffer said, “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, communion without confession, grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ. Costly grace is like the treasure hidden in the field, said Jesus. For the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It’s the pearl of great price... it’s the call of Jesus Christ for which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.”

Is it good to accept the grace and forgiveness that God freely offers in Christ? Of course, it is. But if we presume on that forgiveness with no sense of repentance, change, or growth in Christian maturity, we’ve missed something important.

Whenever the message of Jesus is preached, there will be questions, misunderstandings, disagreements, and rejections. That’s why Paul wrote the letter to the emerging church in Rome. He imagines people asking the typical questions about these things.

I. A Christian’s Relationship to Sin (vs. 1-2)

In Romans chapter 5, Paul shared the good news of God’s grace and forgiveness. “Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more!” Then the common question arises, “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” I’m sure you’ve heard it. Yet, I’ve never met a believer who would say it’s ok to go on sinning while thinking ahead of time that “Oh well, God will forgive anyway.” Paul says that’s just stupid thinking. With Paul, we can also forcefully say, “Hell no!” - rendered nicely in our Bible, “By no means!”

Paul says if anyone thinks this is Christianity, you are dead wrong. Any person who has experienced the grace, mercy, forgiveness and new life in Christ would never subscribe to this way of life and faith.

Some people give little or no thought to sin, its consequences, or its effects. James Dobson jokingly yet seriously said, “The grass on the other side is often *not* greener; it’s not even edible.” With “cheap grace,” we can forget our true identity in Christ.

“Moralists” feel that sin – if they even use the term – is a human problem that has human solutions. “Legalists” try to conquer sin through legislation. The gospel contrasts

all three by offering a relationship with Jesus Christ as the way to identify with and handle the reality of sin in our lives.

God's word says, "Count yourselves, reckon yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

II. A Christian's Relationship with Christ (vs. 3-10)

Paul then talks about our identity as a believer and as a church in the meaning of baptism. Our identity is established by faith in Jesus and how his death and resurrection affect our lives. "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? For we know that the old self was crucified with him. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too may live a new life."

When Jews or Gentiles came to faith in Jesus as Messiah/Savior, they made a profession of faith, were given instruction, and emerged from the water as a "new person." A totally new start in life was impressed. Quite often, new believers were rejected for their new faith. Some were even forced to leave their family behind. Direct from the legalism of Judaism or the secular life of paganism, converts to Christ died to one kind of life and rose to another. Baptism declares this in an impressive way.

Paul's favorite phrase for Christian identity is "in Christ." One analogy suggests that fish can live only in water. Unless we are in Christ we cannot live the life God intends.

Here's what our Presbyterian *Book of Order* says about baptism. "Baptism is the sign and seal of incorporation into Christ... In Baptism, we participate in Jesus' death and resurrection... Baptism signifies the faithfulness of God, the washing away of sin, rebirth, putting on the fresh garment of Christ, being sealed by God's Spirit, adoption into the covenant family of the Church, resurrection and illumination in Christ."

Conclusion

During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated the uniqueness of Christianity. Was it the Incarnation? Other religions had versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Other religions had accounts of return from death.

The debate went on until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked, and heard his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique

contribution among world religions. Lewis said, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”

The notion of God’s love coming to us freely seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eightfold path, the Hindu doctrine of Karma, the Jewish covenant, and the Muslim code of law — each offers an attempt to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God’s love a gift freely offered, freely received.

That’s our identity in Christ. Sinners saved by grace. It is God’s will and wish that everyone here this morning, that this whole congregation in life and ministry together identify in this way.

We are “the salt of the earth” and “light of the world” not *so that* we can be in Christ, but *because* we are “in Christ.” We cannot save ourselves as the moralist suggests. We cannot obey God’s laws well enough to prove ourselves to God or anyone else. And never presume on God’s mercy and favor through “cheap grace.”

Our identity is chiseled in stone on the front of this church building. *Sola gratia*. *Sola fide* “Only by grace. Only by faith.” May that be chiseled on our hearts. Let us pray together.