

Sermon Epiphany 6 2019

February 17, 2019

I Cor. 15:1-20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we'll meditate on the Epistle Lesson previously read.

As we listen to Paul speak about himself, we have some insight into his view of his own life, don't we? Listen to what he says there again. Now, remember he has been talking about how Jesus was raised from the dead and appeared to so many, even 500 at once—something that we should see points us to the reliability of Jesus' resurrection, by the way. But he speaks of these appearances then describes himself, saying, **“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.”** As we hear those words, we can hear Paul's regret, can't we?

In fact, as we as people often reflect on our own pasts with shame, or as we reflect on the negative things that have happened even to us in the past, we have Paul as an example. Look at him. Look at his life. I am guessing you all would remember what Paul had done. He had been a Jew. He had been a really good Jew, really zealous and devout. He had been trained under the rabbi Gamaliel, which would be akin to going to the Ivy Leagues today. He himself speaks of how he not only had that training but the zeal keep God's commands faithfully, to follow the fullness of the Old Covenant, the Covenant of the Law. In his letter to the Philippians he describes this saying, **“If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”** And those last two phrases say it all. As to the righteousness of the Law, he was blameless. No one could have more confidence as a Jew than Paul. But what did he do in that confidence? He persecuted the Church. He saw Christians as blasphemers and as they came into public view, he went after them. They had to stop as far as Paul was concerned.

In fact, the book of Acts tells us about how when Stephen was stoned to death, Paul was there. When there were Christians as far as Damascus, Paul was there to end their confession, even going so far as to get a letter from the Sanhedrin, the ruling council for

the Jews, even going so far as to get a letter from them giving him authority in killing Christians. Paul was zealous as a Jew, and that zeal went so far as murder.

Now imagine yourself as Paul, and you can see how he must have viewed this. You probably remember his conversion, how the Lord Jesus knocked him off of his donkey on Paul's way to Damascus, how the Lord shone down on Paul with a bright light and said, "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?" to which Paul replied, "Who are you Lord?" And Jesus responded, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." At which point Paul realized his mistake. You can imagine the fear and the crushing sorrow that you would have—to think that you are serving God to suddenly realizing you are attacking him. Paul's past was checkered to say the least.

In view of that we can see why he would call himself an apostle who was untimely born. Now as I say this I am saying that Paul is recognizing this about himself, some commentators think this was an attack that was brought against him, but it doesn't matter. It makes the point about Paul's past. You see this word there translated one untimely born is the same word used for a miscarriage or an abortion. The point is clear: Paul isn't supposed to exist as an apostle. Not only does he not have the qualification the other apostles have of having learned from the Lord during Jesus' earthly ministry, but worse than that, he killed Christians. As an apostle, he shouldn't be. He sees it and knows it, and some detractors perhaps do too.

The point? Paul looks back at his life and can see some horrible marks in it. He can see just how bad he was. He can see it and we can understand it even grieves him. But what does he understand? **"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain."** He understands that this past can be thrown in his face, his nose can be forced into it like a dog, but what does that mean to Paul? In a sense it doesn't matter, does it? It doesn't matter, "So what, yes that's true, but so what? I have the grace of God, and God's grace toward me was not in vain."

You see Paul can look at this past and He can understand that this God of His is the One who can take this horrible sin of Paul's past and use it. You think that there is someone who could better teach about the death and resurrection of Jesus than someone who used to persecute it? You think there is a better suited apostle than the one who used to kill Christians? There is the past of Paul, and yet the Lord redeemed it and used this horrible sinner to bring the Gospel into the world, into Rome, the center of the Western World at that time.

Think about the goodness of God in the midst of that. In fact, think not only about it there, but in the whole of Scripture. I know I've mentioned this example before in this sort of context, but think about Joseph. I love that example of Joseph. You remember Joseph, with his coat of many colors? And what happened to Joseph? Well, Joseph had some pride, but not really a sin which caused him to deserve his life. Remember that? He was the favorite of his father Jacob, Israel, and so Jacob gave him that coat, and made Joseph's eleven brothers jealous. So what did they do? Well first they thought they'd kill him, but then Judah advocated for his life, so they decided to sell him into slavery instead. So off Joseph went to slavery in Egypt, ending up a slave in the household of Potiphar, the second in charge in Egypt. Then if all this wasn't enough, Joseph was falsely accused of attempted rape by Potiphar's wife, after Joseph had properly rejected her advances. So poor Joseph ended up in jail. But what finally happened? Joseph was, in jail, utilized to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, which earned him the place of overseeing the distribution of their excesses in the years of famine. And who finally had to ask Joseph for some of this excess? Joseph's brothers. Of course they didn't know it was Joseph that was giving them this aid, but look at the circumstances. The Lord used this horrible circumstance to accomplish his great good. He used the figurative death and resurrection of Joseph to accomplish the caring for his people to sustain them—ultimately of course sustaining the Jewish people that they would be preserved to the birth of Christ. But of course, why this is such a great story actually comes into play with what we're talking about years later in Joseph's life.

You see, if you remember, after this, Joseph's family came to live with him in Egypt, being cared for by him. Finally, Joseph's father, Jacob, died. And upon his death, Joseph's brothers were scared. They thought that this would be their end too. They thought for sure once Israel was out of the picture, Joseph would exact his revenge on the brothers for their indiscretion with his life. So, they come stammering into Joseph's chambers, and they tell Joseph that of course, Jacob had requested that Joseph spare their lives. And how does Joseph respond? Well, he makes it clear that he doesn't think Jacob actually made such a request. But he does so in his words. And this is what is so beautiful for us to hear. Joseph makes it clear he's not going to kill his brothers. He says, **"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."**

You see Christians, this is the joy that Paul had. This grace of God, the grace that we have. The grace of knowing that the evil we mean against God and man, God means for good. Does this mean we sin intentionally because we know God will make good of even that? No. But it means that we live knowing that the sin of our past is used for good. It

means that we look at the wrongs against us and know that they are for good. It means that horrible things that we endure in this life we know that they are for good. In fact, as Jesus described persecution—something we'll see more and more I think in the days ahead as the culture around us will twist our beliefs and convictions into things that should be ridiculed—as Jesus describes this we can know even that is a blessing and God uses it for good. And how do we know? It is the promise of the very thing that Paul received and what he passed along to the Corinthian Church: the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

You see in that work, the Lord has revealed that He truly is capable of bringing good out of all circumstances. After all, think about Jesus. What is worse than this perfect man, God in the flesh being killed at the hands of murderous sinners? Think about it. Did Jesus deserve that? No. Death is the wage of sin, and He never sinned. He didn't deserve death. That is the worst possible thing. But what came from that? It was the redemption of those very sinners responsible for His death. It was the best possible thing: the redemption of sinful mankind. Christians, what a gift we have!

This is how Paul could speak as he did. And this is how you can too. In fact, as we speak of Paul receiving and handing down, we hear him telling the Corinthians just a few chapters before this of something else he received that he handed down: the Lord's Supper. And as you receive that, that body and blood of this Jesus crucified and raised for you, you have that promise that the sin in your life, the sin in your past, the circumstances that have crushed you and made you believe that there is nothing good, that even those this God who entered into our humanity, that even those can be redeemed by Him into good things. By that promise you can truly trust that He does work all things to the good of those who love Him. You can truly trust that He will bring good things to you.

And Christian, consider the confidence this gives you. Just as Paul, in that confidence, was able to endure persecution and thorns in the flesh, and the bearing of the marks of Christ, so can you. Yes as you look at your sin, your life, and the circumstances around you, you too can know you are blessed by God. Blessed just as He speaks of in the Old Testament Lesson. Hear those words again as we conclude this morning: **"Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit."** Amen