

“None is righteous, no, not one.” Romans 3:10

Pentecost season; the second Sunday

Text: Mark 2:23-28

In this season we are going to look at how the Christian life looks with our feet on the ground. We need to know how to live and what to do, practically. This is what the Pentecost season is about. The question is how to do it. How do we do this?

A teacher once said: “All thinking in Christianity is summed up in the problem of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.” A lot of the problems are there. But that teacher may not be steering us rightly because it doesn’t matter where you begin – you can begin at the beginning or begin at the end – all of it is tied together, and it is one.

What then should be our starting point? You start with what the problem is. And the problem is sin and death. We are caught in an inevitable run through sin to death, and the question is: How can we get out of it? What can be done?

In order to do that we have to use the Bible and the way Christians think. To get at that, let’s look at some illustrations:

A few years ago the Episcopal Church USA in convention passed a resolution condemning the Bible for being oppressive. They said in effect: The Bible has it wrong. This idea is nothing new. It’s part of the Enlightenment. Basically people are good. Basically people are innocent. We need more education, to be tolerant. After all we’re made in image of God, and there is something in us that can tell us what to do, and we can do it if we just work at it.

That’s why the text in Mark 2 about the Sabbath is so important. Because people will often say: At least you know what the ten commandments are. This, of course, is where we are completely kidding ourselves. What is said in this text in Mark 2: 23-28 is not that Jesus threw out the Sabbath but that he transformed it. He transformed it just as in the fifth chapter of Matthew, where the other commandments are transformed but not abrogated.

We, those of us in the Western church and particularly those of us who take the Bible seriously, face the problem that we keep the first day of the week. Sabbath is Saturday. It cannot be shown in the New Testament that Jesus or anyone else ever suggested that we should not continue this seventh day.

So we don’t keep the Third Commandment. In the early church for the first three hundred years they struggled with this. And eventually they/we keep the first day of the week, except for the Seventh Day Adventists and Seventh Day Baptists. But if you are going to say – if you want to know what sin is, just look at the ten commandments and keep them – you’ve got a problem. What do we do then?

In Theology 101 in seminary one of the things we were asked to do is take a concordance and look up words for “sin.” There are many kinds of words for “sin.” One of them is “missing the mark.” You tried to shoot and didn’t quite hit the bullseye, so you missed. Or “disobedience.” You were to be obedient, but you didn’t do enough and you didn’t do it sincerely. Or another word is “lawlessness.” You have to keep the law and keep all the law and not just some of it. And then suddenly you come to the apostle Paul, except where he is quoting a different text, that is, from somebody else, sin is always in the singular; it’s

never plural. Sin is a power that grabs you. It's not something where we say either we make it or we don't make it, either we are obedient or disobedient. Sin is a power that grabs you.

Suddenly it's a different world! What does Paul then do? Paul makes a very clear identification between sin and death. Romans 6:23 says: "The wages of sin is death." 1 Cor 15:26: "The last enemy to be conquered is death." 1 Cor 15:56: "The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law." In Romans 5:12: In Adam all of us sinned; in Adam all of us died.

The Western church has struggled with this and defined this finally only in 529 A.D. (The second Synod of Orange. The Eastern Church does not hold to original sin.) But the point that is most omitted among us today is that according to what the Bible says, the image of God was lost in the fall into sin, and it's only restored in Christ. That is specifically stated in Colossians 3:10. Unless one is in Christ, one doesn't have the image of God. There is not some way that one can keep the law.

Luther speaks to this situation in a fascinating way where he says: The last temptation, the sneakiest temptation of the evil one is to make us think that we can tell what sin is and isn't. And then we know. We can determine it by the way we feel, by our conscience, or by guilt, or by some other sense that we can tell. Then the evil one has us; he has caught us because the big sin, the basic sin, the real sin is spiritual pride. We are all caught in it. We say: Well, that was the Christian thing to do. Or that person acted in a saintly way. Or: It's simple. You know what is good and you do it. You know what it's about. Then the devil's got us.

Again and again Luther quotes from Isaiah 64:6: "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags." And it's not just that verse. It's the same as Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt." And Romans 3:10-18: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one. . . ."

That's an "EGO" moment: **Eyes Glaze Over**. It can't be me! I tune out at that point. You mean I don't determine what sin is? I can't know what sin is? Of course, we can't. If anyone starts to wake up to this problem of spiritual pride, as Luther points out very well, then you fall into spiritual despair. Because you realize we can't get out of it. We're trapped. We're always thinking: We know. We can sort it out. Especially for others but also for ourselves. We know what it is and therefore we can work it out.

What does Luther say and what is the basic sense of the gospel? The gospel is: Only sinners can be saved. If you're not a sinner, you can't be saved. This is pointed out most radically in Romans 4:5 speaking of Abraham of all people: "And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness." Justification is of the ungodly, not of the good and the nice who think that they are doing well.

Luther and the New Testament, especially Paul, point out: The only way one knows what sin is through the cross. The cross tells us what sin is. What does that mean? First of all, it means the Lord saw that we were caught in sin and death. And second, he handled it on the cross his way. We would never have thought of doing it that way. He did it his way, and, of course, it is done.

The movie of some years ago, *The Passion of Christ*, was popular in many Christian circles but not everyone was enthused about it. Some said it was too gory or too antisemitic or something. The problem with that film, as awful as it is, is that it is not awful enough. We could think of other ways of killing somebody that would be even worse. No human event can even in a tiny way describe what it is

for the Holy One, the one who is truly holy, to take on sin and death. That's just beyond us. It blows everything apart.

We say: Well, for God what we do is trivial. It doesn't matter to him, can't hurt him. All he wants is for us to try to be good, when as a matter of fact he's not asking us to be good; he's asking us to be his, which is an entirely different matter. He did it his way and it has been finished and is summed up in 2 Cor 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." The sweet swop. The best business deal in the world. He takes on our sin, and we take on his holiness. What better bargain is there than that. And it's finished. And we are called upon to thank, praise, and obey him. Amen