

The best deal there ever was.

2 Cor 5:21

A sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

2 Cor 5:21 is a key verse: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

We use this verse over and over again. It's a key verse in the whole of 2 Corinthians. It was one of Luther's favorites. It is the best business deal ever. God took our sin; we take his holiness. He took our death; he gives us life forever with him.

Why this verse? This isn't the only place that says something like this. Romans 8:3 says that he was made "in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin." This is not some sudden twist of thought. It's basic. It has something basic to say to us.

We should study and memorize this verse. The problem is that after we do that, the conversation would turn to: "What do you think the weather is going to be like tomorrow?" "Did you see what happened to the price of gas?" We get sidetracked by something else.

The way this goes is someone says: "Pastor, your hobby is to look at such verses, but my hobby is to support the causes that I want to champion. There are many organizations who do good things. If that's what you like, fine. What else is new?"

It's useful to take this verse and ask: What does it mean? "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

There are three necessary consequences from this verse that show why it's a key verse.

First, it says: "In him." Not in someone else or somewhere else. It is speaking against other religions. "In him" we become the righteousness of God. There are other verses like this, but we don't remember them. People know John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes **in him** should not perish but have eternal life." Again, we sort of pass over "in him." The same is true in John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."

What happens in the common way of thinking? One famous Catholic thinker in the last century, Karl Rahner, said: "The truth is in Jesus Christ." But then he added that there are "anonymous" Christians, which is to say that they would be Christians if they knew enough, but they don't have it figured out in the words we use. Therefore there are Christians and "anonymous" Christians.

Shortly after Rahner said this, a leader from the Buddhist religion remarked: "Ha! Then everyone is an 'anonymous' Buddhist. After all, if you really got into it, you would realize that the only thing possible is to be a Buddhist." This is one of the ways that trouble sneaks in. (There are about a half billion Buddhists today.)

Remember it says: "In him" is the righteousness. The other way to go astray that is even sneakier is that we reduce this all to an idea. We say: "Well, yes, there's truth. Or there's love. Or there's Jesus Christ. And there's the idea about him. And the truth about him." It's not about him; it's that he does it. When we see it that way, it's not an abstraction. He does it. He is the one in whom is the righteousness of God. That's the first of the necessary consequences.

The second of the necessary consequences is that it is "in him" and not in the canon (that is, the Bible or the Book), not in the creed, the clergy, or in the church, but in the cross. Note these all begin with the letter "c." We can work this out with the letter "c."

But we do have the distraction of saying: "It's this verse." Why do you elevate this verse? Why not another verse? We can play the game of Bible verses. It's not just that there is John 3:16 or 2 Cor 5:21. Why this verse? Is it some kind of canon within the canon? Don't you have to take all of the Bible? Which, of course, nobody does, and nobody is able to do, but that is what people say in order to avoid this central point. It isn't a truth or an abstraction, but rather Jesus Christ is the Truth. Truth is a person. He is the middle, the canon for all of Scripture.

And the second of these distractions is that it is not the creed. We use the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, and we could look at the earliest and shortest of all the creeds. We find it in 1 Cor 12:3: "Jesus is Lord." We could say that verse is it. But it so easily becomes again an abstraction. What the Bible is really saying is not Jesus is Lord but he "lords" it. He does it. He is the One who "lords" it over all of creation and all of salvation. It's the doing of it. Not some idea that is at stake. When the Word is proclaimed, it's not because there is some abstract truth that we take from

whatever is said. An abstract truth is not doing salvation, but it is in his doing it because his promise never fails.

It's also not the church or the clergy. We get caught in the idea that the church has some kind of truth in it itself. Some people will say: "If you can't believe the church, who can you believe?" Or: "If you can't believe the clergy, who can you believe?" We just laugh because as C.S. Lewis said: "The devil works harder in the church because he owns all the rest." He works even harder among the clergy because they are the leaders.

That's why one of the great rediscoveries of Paul during the Reformation was the priesthood of **all** believers. We are all called upon to proclaim the Word. Of course, it is in the cross, but not the cross as an idea. Rather, in what he does: "He made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might the righteousness of God." He does that in the cross. That's what is central.

The third necessary consequence is that it's "in him" and not in me. Throughout church history we've had this problem of saying it's in him, yes, but there has to be a little bit of me involved, too. Then we lose what this little verse helps us see. "In him" we are totally justified. We are totally made his own. As Romans 8:30 states: "We are already glorified" (aorist).

At the same time we are totally sinners because we are under sin and death, but the basic "doneness" is there. That means it's not in me, in anything I feel, or in my experience, or in my conscience, or in what is "clear." Some say: "It's clear, therefore" No. It's in Him, not in me. Therefore, thank God. If it depended on me in any way, if it had to be clear enough, or if it depended on anything I would say or do, then I could never be sure that I had done it right or done it enough. And look at all the sins of omission, not to speak of the sins of commission. But because it's in him and not in us, we can be certain. Here's another word with "c." We have a certainty, "a living hope" as it says in 1 Peter 1:3, because it's not in me; it's in him.

The second part of this third point is: It's not in us. Not in us as a group, a congregation (starting with "c"), or with the church, or in councils.

It can help in catching what's at stake in this little verse by substituting the word "holiness" for the word "righteousness," so 2 Cor 5:21 could be read: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the holiness of God."

Remember, Paul was a Jew and thought as a Jew. The Hebrew word for "righteousness," the word for "judgment," the word "holiness," and the word for "peace" all flow together. They all mean the same thing: The Lord is Lord so that in him we might become the holiness of God, the peace of God, the judgment of God, the righteousness of God.

What that means is that he is the one who builds the kingdom. It doesn't depend on me. We know the slogan for the church used by some: "God's work, our hands." That's simply false. In a previous generation they had a similar slogan: "He has no hands but ours." That's also simply false.

In Matthew 3:9 there is a controversy with the Jewish leaders who said: "God has to be dependent on us as Jews. We are the sons of Abraham." The answer is: "No way. The Lord can raise up sons of Abraham from these stones."

We find that throughout the Old Testament. The Lord uses Babylonia or Persia or other sinful places to do his will, his work. It doesn't depend on us. Because it doesn't, we are free to be his creatures. Just because you are ordained as a pastor or bishop, there is no particular expertise that you have about politics, economics, or world diplomacy, or anything of that sort. The church has often been caught in the trap of thinking that Christians as a group have some higher wisdom or extra insight that matters. Not at all. (Luther: "Councils, too, can err.")

We are called to work in this world to bring the gospel. That means to do whatever is needed for the betterment of the world (Oberman), so that the worst chaos is kept at bay, but yet not to fall into the delusion that we build God's kingdom and the kingdoms we build are God's. We have fallen into that trap throughout church history. We are his creatures, and we think with the common, broken reason everyone else has, and we live by forgiveness every day.

This brings us back to 2 Cor 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, that in him we might become the righteousness of God." The best deal there ever was. Amen