

## **The death sentence over you, lifted**

Romans 8:6-11

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent

In Romans 8:1-11 we have the whole of the Christian faith. Well, at least two-thirds of the heart of it. The text for today begins at verse 6; it's useful, however, to see verses 6-11 in light of what comes before.

The first verse 8:1 announces: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." To put it in our terms today: "There is therefore no death sentence for those who are in Christ Jesus." Death is dead. That's the whole ball game.

It goes on to talk about "the flesh." We get confused because we think "flesh" means your body, the meat on your bones. But that's not what Paul means. He uses "flesh" to mean everything opposed to God, to the Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit. "Flesh" is that power of evil, of wickedness battling within us and outside of us. The battle goes back and forth, and this battle has been won. He writes:

"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

We could paraphrase this: Sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, God condemned sin in order that we might be given his Son's holiness.

This is like 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 (holiness) of God."

Luther called that the great exchange, the happy exchange. He took our sin and death and gives us his holiness and life forever. The best deal there ever was.

That is that great message of Matthew 20:28: "The Son of man came . . . to give his life as a ransom for many" – is the same thing. We are slaves, and he buys us and frees us.

Luther says the same thing in Small Catechism (2<sup>nd</sup> Article):

". . . [H]e has redeemed me, a lost and condemned sinner, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with his holy and precious blood . . . in order that I may be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity."

Then comes Romans 8:6-11, which is like what Luther writes in the Small Catechism:

“I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church he daily and abundantly forgives all my sins, and the sins of all believers, and on the last day he will raise me and all the dead and will grant eternal life to me and to all who believe in Christ. This is most certainly true.”

When Luther wrote the Small Catechism, he wasn't making stuff up; all he was doing was paraphrasing what Paul writes in Romans 8. And the great conclusion is: There is therefore no death sentence over those who are in Christ Jesus.

You may say: “Yeah, we know that. We've heard that all before. Same-old, same-old. What else is new? Why do we have this thing about going to church when there are so many important things to do?!”

To us it may seem like pablum, a soft bland cereal for babies. Boring and tasteless. Who wants that? Not interesting at all. Just for babies.

But this message: “There is therefore now no more death for those who are in Christ Jesus” – is explosive. It's explosive to the extent that it scares us. It means that there are no conditions. No preconditions nor post conditions. For those who are in Christ Jesus the last judgment is over, death has been conquered, and therefore also sin and the devil.

It's scary. How do we live? What happens is that we fall back in two ways. One temptation is to fall into the law thinking: “Yes, but you have to live a certain way to prove it, show it, and if you don't, that's trouble.” In this way we forget the message is about freedom, freedom to think and to do what seems needed to meet the challenges of the day.

We forget that the Christian life is hidden under the cross; you can't see it. We forget that the real problem is pride, spiritual pride, that is, trusting in our works, wanting to judge ourselves as “good people,” forgetting that “all our righteous deeds are filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6), forgetting that all works are broken, limited, as are we ourselves. Yes, we do works, but we don't trust in them.

And the opposite trap is to think: “Ha! Anything goes. Nothing matters. We can do whatever we like because, after all, God will pick up the pieces.”

That way leads to big trouble, too. If a 10-year-old wants to drive a car, we don't hand over the keys and say: “Sure, go ahead. Do whatever you want.” No, we say: “No, you can't have the keys. You could get hurt. Other people could get hurt.”

The Apostle Paul thought about all of this and in Romans 3:8, 6:1 and 6:15, he speaks to this. Romans 6:1: "What shall we say then? Are we going to continue in sin that grace may abound?" Rom 6:15: "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?" In both cases he uses a Greek term that is the closest thing to swearing, without actually swearing. He says in effect: "Come on, people. You can get this. Wake up. Grow up."

In 1 Cor 3:1-3 he says in effect: "Don't be babies eating pabulum your whole life. Grow up so you can eat solid food." Grow up and take up the battle against evil.

The author of Hebrews does the same in 5:11-13: Wake up, grow up.

"About this we have much to say which is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of God's word. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil."

In other words: "Grow up and take up the battle."

And there are three things that help us sort it out.

First, using 1 Cor 6:19-20: "You are not your own; you were bought with a price." We belong to somebody. We belong to him.

Second, because we belong to him, we are headed for his other kingdom where sin and death are no more. As it says in Hebrews 13:14: "For here we have no lasting city."

Third, because we have been bought with a price and are his, we have freedom and certainty now. He changes everything.

Finally, how does that lead to how we live? Paul writes in 2 Cor 5:16: "We no longer look at each other according to the old point of view, but we look at each other according to the cross" (Rom 14:15; 1 Cor 8:11). Each one of us is marked with the sign of the cross forever. Each one of us is one for whom Christ died, and that is how we look at each other.

Forgiven and free. And that's how we live today and all our days because we are his.

Amen