

Easter 2017
Pastor Brett McBride
April 16, 2017

If you have your Bibles with you I would ask that you turn to 1 Corinthians Chapter 15. If you don't have a Bible there are ones in the pew in front of you. 1 Corinthians is on Page 802. I grabbed a Bible out of the pew before coming up.

If you are a visitor with us, welcome. In a few moments some people from our church body will be getting baptized. And I want to spend a few moments this morning reflecting on what we celebrate as Christians on Easter Sunday, and understand what these people who are getting baptized are declaring in the midst of their baptism today.

Before we read from 1 Corinthians, I just want to set the context of what the Apostle Paul has written in the passage we are about to read. The book of Corinthians is written to a church that isn't filled with wise or influential people – we are told that in the Bible; we are told that in 1 Corinthians.

It is a church that is suffering all kinds of divisions within the body. It is a church where immorality is rampant within the body. It is a church that is suing one another. It is a church that is experiencing a lot of dysfunction.

And actually the Apostle Paul, who has written the passage we are about to read this morning, himself, before he encountered the person of Christ was a persecutor of the church. He was a terrorist to the early church.

And we need to be mindful that even when we open this book and turn to this passage on Easter Sunday that these letters are written to imperfect people. The Gospel message isn't for people who have it all together. It is for imperfect people.

Isn't that good news, Church?

So as we enter into this passage this morning, mindful of that, Paul has spent 14 chapters dealing with the various areas of dysfunction that this church body wrestled with.

And then in Chapter 15 it's as though he lifts them by the chin and has them look towards the Gospel and look towards heaven again. And he spends the whole chapter – 58 verses – reminding them of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, talking about the historical fact of the resurrection and all the people that witnessed the resurrected Jesus.

And it is as though He is lifting their face from all the issues that they suffer day to day, all the areas of dysfunction that is present within their lives to remind them of who it is all about.

And so we enter this text with that reality.

And after reminding them of the Gospel, Paul, in two verses, speaks to the whole of Scripture, speaks to the human condition and reminds us of the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 15:56 we read this:

“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

“But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law.

That speaks to much of the human condition and what you read of in the Old Testament Scripture. See, God wanted to reveal Himself to humanity and He chose a people group to whom He would reveal Himself and make Himself known.

The Israelites who were in bondage in Egypt suffering hundreds of years of slavery; God sees their suffering, hears their cries and raises up Moses to go and deliver His people from their bondage in Egypt under Pharaoh.

And when He brings them out to Mount Sinai, He gives them His perfect law. He brings this liberated people out into the desert. And God enters into a legal covenant relationship with His people.

Many of us would know some of those laws. Many of us would be familiar with the Ten Commandments. When He brings them out to Mount Sinai, He speaks to them directly and He gives them the Ten Commandments. (They are on the screen.)

You shall have no other gods before Me.

You shall not make for yourselves an image.

You shall not misuse – remember the Sabbath Day. On it you shall not work.

Honor your father and mother.

Shall not, shall not, shall not, shall not, shall not. 9 out of 10 of the commandments are shall not's. One of them is about what we ought to do.

And they receive these commands from God; when they experience a holy God on Mount Sinai, they are shuddering and trembling because of who He is. And they enter into a covenant relationship with their God based on these laws.

And Moses goes back up Mount Sinai (we read this in Exodus); Moses goes back up Mount Sinai, and as Moses is a long time up there with God, God's people, who are waiting for Moses to come back down, decide to throw a celebration to their God who has delivered them from

Egypt. And within days of receiving the Ten Commandments, break virtually all of them in the celebration that they engage in.

They make a golden calf, an idol, the very thing they were told not to do. There was all kinds of pagan revelry that they engaged in.

And see they had been brought out of Egypt but much of Egypt still remains in them.

And when you study the Old Testament it almost seems like when we are told not to do something, the urge to do the very thing we have been told not to do becomes that much stronger. (And all the parents in the room said, Amen!)

I worked with children for many years. We would give specific instructions to children, detailed instructions about what they shall not do, and no matter how many times we uttered the instructions, they did not hear them. Some of them ignored them or some of them heard them and wanted to provoke you to wrath.

We give instructions to our children and it seemingly is a never-ending stream of instructing them in the way they should go, but them struggling and wrestling with obedience to what we ask them to do.

And as you look at God throughout the Old Testament He is a parent speaking to His covenant people, warning His people about obeying the covenant. But much like children, sometimes aren't listening or drifting away.

And Paul captures this in 1 Corinthians 15:56 because the power of sin is the law. It is when we are told not to do something that the power of sin becomes evident in our lives, because there is a longing to do the very thing we are told not to do.

And as you study throughout the Old Testament, you notice one common theme: nobody, not one human being, is able to obey God's commands fully. Every single human being disobeys Him at some point.

Some are grossly breaching His law when you read through the Scriptures; others seem like they commit simple misdemeanors. Some fall away from it intentionally; others drift away from it casually.

But what they all share in common is that their relationship to the law is one of failure.

As you enter into the New Testament, you notice some people who feel pretty righteous, some people who have been living a very devout life and are really religious and they believe that they are in good standing with God because of their good behavior.

And Jesus comes along and He starts to take the Ten Commands and revisit them. And He explained the Ten Commandments with a little more detail – He did this in the Sermon on the Mount.

In Matthew Chapter 5 Jesus brings up the commandment about murder. In Matthew 5:21 He says,

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement.’

“But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgement. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

What? You mean, if I just say, “You fool!” I’m under judgement because of the law?

That doesn’t bode well for people in Toronto who drive on the 401. You might say, “You fool”; you might say a few other choice words. I would wager to say that even parking in the parking lot, there might be a few people who uttered a “Raca” on the way in.

Jesus, to those who would profess to be righteous before a Holy God, in Matthew 5:27, again dives into one of the Old Testament laws.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’

“But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

What?

See God’s holiness is measured in a different way than we measure things. God’s righteous and holy vision goes to our hearts and the attitudes in our minds and even the thoughts that we have towards one another. And who of us can stand before a holy God and claim that we are without sin?

No matter how hard we try or how good we are, our goodness doesn’t measure up to His perfection.

And the whole purpose of the law was to expose our sin, our inability to live a holy life as measured by His standards, not ours.

Romans 3:20 puts it this way:

“Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.”

I grew up going to church. I was sometimes dressed into Sunday's best – there's a photo that is going to be put up on the screen behind me. This is me as I went to church. I know what you are thinking, Church, "My goodness! He had hair!"

What can I say? The products of the fall have challenged my own life. We are all in a state of decay.

You have got to love the three-piece suit, the polyester reversible suit, you know. If you went near an open flame in that thing it would just go up like that.

But I remember going to church and I had beautiful Gospel centered churches that we attended. I had beautiful Sunday school teachers. And they wanted to teach us the Scriptures, they wanted to provide incentive for us to memorize the Scriptures, and so they had all kinds of Scripture memory incentives.

One of them was called scholar dollars. If you could go and quote the verse (in the King James Version of course); if you could go and quote the verse, you would receive some scholar dollars.

And I wasn't very good at Scripture memory. I remember others coming in and it seemed like they had briefcases with handcuffs chained to the briefcase because they had so many scholar dollars. They would pull out big wads of scholar dollars and I was sitting there begging for any scholar dollar I could get my hands on.

I remember at another church the incentive program was rocket ships. And as you shared your memory verse, your rocket ship went higher. And I remember watching all the other rocket ships go really high and mine just seemingly was out of fuel. It just stayed grounded.

Maybe you are here this morning and you are revisiting church and that sense of going to church, no matter how hard you tried, no matter how good of a little boy or girl you tried to be, you just inwardly didn't sense like you measured up because you perceived a law-based perspective of who God is.

You saw that He is holy and no matter how much effort you put into it, you just couldn't measure up. Your rocket ship didn't get off the ground. And it left you feeling defeated and not victorious.

That's what Paul is describing in Verse 56.

"The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law."

The whole purpose of the law was to reveal to us that we can't live it. It was designed to expose sin.

And God's law which exposed sin's power created a stinging death within each of us.

But then Paul calls their attention to God's activity in the New Testament in Verse 57 when he says,

“But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Do you notice that verse? God interjects something different into the condition of man. He is the One who initiates giving us the victory in Jesus Christ. It is a victory He gives us and it is a victory through Christ's work.

Paul explains this in the earlier verses of Chapter 15 and Verses 1 and 2. He says,

“I want to remind you of the gospel...By this gospel you are saved...Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day all according to the Scriptures.”

Paul has called their attention back to the centrality of who Christ is and he says in these verses, “Christ died. Why did He die? For our sins. For every time we broke the law. For every time we fell short. For every time we uttered, “You fool!” on the 401. For every time a careless word came out of our mouth. For every time we had that thought that we shouldn't have or did that sin that we shouldn't have.

For every single one of them Christ died.

And Paul emphasizes that Christ died according to the Scriptures, because God knew that the power of sin was the law. So in His grace and mercy, when He gave the law, He also embedded throughout the Old Testament prophecies pointing to a coming Messiah who would deliver us from our condition.

And one of those verses we read in Isaiah 53, written hundreds of years before Jesus went to the cross – Isaiah 53:5:

“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

See, there is a pattern in those verses where the author is writing between what He was for us. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. He was punished so that we might have peace.

It's all about what He has done for us. And we don't earn it. We earned death. We earned judgement. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory.

Romans 3:21 puts it this way:

“But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known to which the Law and the Prophets testify.

“This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

What these people, who are getting baptized, are declaring before all of us is that they can't do it, that there is an inability within ourselves to stand before a holy and righteous God clean by our own strength.

But they at the same time are confessing their faith in Jesus Christ who was pierced for our transgressions, who was crushed because of our iniquities, who was punished so that we might have peace.

They are declaring their inability. In the Old Testament God gave His law, but in the New Testament He gave His life.

And what we were powerless to do, He did for us. And when we put our faith in who He is and what He has done, He comes and makes His home in our lives. And because He is holy, we become holy. Because He is righteous, we become righteous. Because He loves purity when He comes into our lives, we begin to love purity and our appetites and attitudes begin to change because of His indwelling presence in our lives.

And all of a sudden the “You shall not” of the Old Testament becomes “You shall not” because of who He is in our lives. That's what this group is declaring today as they get baptized.

Baptism is a beautiful picture of both death and life, dead to the law; raised in new life in Christ. Dead to their ability; alive in His ability. Dead to the defeated life; raised to the victorious life.

Does that mean everything is going to be easy in life? Not at all, but there is a presence with you walking through every struggle, every challenge. There is a relationship that you enter into with Christ that carries you through the storms and whatever you face in life.

And as Paul closes his letter to this imperfect group of people for whom Christ died, as we witness these people getting baptized, we say with the Corinthian church in Verse 55,

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

Jesus triumphed by the cross over sin and death and He invites us into His victory. He is the One who is victorious.

And the good news of the Bible is that Jesus didn't come to die for perfect people. He said Himself, “I have come to seek and to save that who is lost. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.”

That's good news if you are here this morning and you are a sinner, isn't it, Church?

There is no sin that you have committed that is too big for His grace, too much for His blood shed on the cross.

And if you don't know Him, you are here this morning and you are visiting church, exploring why we celebrate, and what I have shared with you resonates with you that no matter how hard you try, deep down you know that you cannot live a righteous life on your own strength, Jesus brought you here for that very purpose, that you might hear this message and know Him.

But if you say no to Jesus, you are saying no to what is described as the righteousness of God that Romans 3:21 talks about. You are depending on your own goodness, and the Bible makes clear that nobody will be justified before God by their own righteousness. It falls short – not according to our standards, but according to His standards.

If you say the no to Jesus you are still in your sins before Him. For God has prepared a way of salvation and His name is Jesus Christ. He came and died for the forgiveness of our sins. Apart from Him there is no other way that we experience a righteousness in which we can stand before a holy God.

So if you want to enter into His victory today, it is open to you and it is through faith in Jesus Christ and what He has done.

And I would recommend if you are in that place this morning where you don't know Jesus, there will be pastors up at the front after the service, out in the foyer and in the café. They are wearing yellow lanyards.

If you have any questions at all about who Jesus is we would be happy to connect and answer them and also get together throughout the week to discuss this important life transforming message.

Let's pray as we get ready for these baptisms.

Father, we thank You for these two verses that remind us that the power of sin is the law, that no matter how hard we tried we could not be justified by law-keeping. But what we were powerless to do, You did for us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Thank You that You give us the victory through faith in Christ, that a righteousness – Your righteousness - is made known to us through Jesus.

And I thank You for each one of these brothers and sisters who are getting baptized now, declaring that what they were powerless to do, You did for them.

We thank You for that good news. Thank You for the salvation we experience.