

Stand Up. Look Up.

In the name of him who will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body, dear friends in Christ: You may remember that two weeks ago I preached a message entitled “*Wake Up. Wash Up. Dress Up.*” It had to do with the Christian life being one of continually *waking up* from our earthly deceptions and becoming ever more aware of God’s truth revealed from his Word, then *washing up* by confessing our sins and being cleansed by Christ’s Word of forgiveness, which leads to our increasingly *dressing up* in the righteousness that Jesus gives to us by his perfect life lived on our behalf. Then last week I preached a sermon that I called “*Speak Up*”. Due to the weather most of you missed it – but a few brave souls were here, and several of you have read it since. Anyway, it had to do with the need we have as Christians to *confess* our faith: to open our mouths and *speak up* with what we believe in our hearts about Jesus – as St. Paul says in Romans chapter ten: “with the heart you believe and are justified, and with the mouth you confess and are saved.” So wake up, wash up, dress up, and now speak up: they’re all part of living the Christian life every day.

Well, you may have noticed that this week’s message is entitled “Stand Up. Look Up”—and so it’s possible that by now some of you are getting a little *fed up* with this repeated “Up” theme and you’re wondering, “When’s he gonna ‘*Shut Up*’ about it?” So I’ll let you know right now that the way I’ve got things planned, today should be the last one you have to *put up* with in this series—unless, of course, I get *mixed up* and do a *change up* – I haven’t yet *made up* my mind; but I’ll give you a *heads up* when you *show up* next week – but remember you’ll have to *get up* an hour earlier to hear it. (And the cry goes *up*: “*Stop! Stop! We’ve had it up to here with it!*” Sorry: don’t get your *dander up* – and don’t get *uppity*.)

Okay, by now you know for certain that the “stand up” in today’s sermon title is not a reference to a certain kind of comedy. It is instead what St. Paul is encouraging the members of the church at Philippi to do. He tells them to stand up and stand firm in their faith in Jesus Christ. You see, they had been doing the very things we’ve been talking about for the last couple weeks. The congregation at Philippi was comprised of a handful of Jewish Christians and a larger number of former pagans. Together they had been called out of their spiritual darkness, they’d seen their errors of their ways both in what they believed and in how they were living and confessing their sins they’d come to faith in Christ. And they were now making substantial forward progress in their understanding and their walk with the Lord. And while they were doing it, they were also confessing their new faith in Christ – often in the face of violent opposition. This was a church that had lots of enemies, so they knew what it meant to suffer persecution for the sake of the Gospel. And so we have Paul exhorting them to keep on moving forward in the faith despite the trials and temptations they were experiencing.

And specifically, what we have in this morning’s text is a warning against *apostasy*. That’s an interesting word, *apostasy*. It’s composed of two Greek words: *stasis*, which you probably know has to do with stability. It literally means to stand upright. And then you have the prefix *apo* which means “away from” or “out of”. So put them together and you have *apo-stasis* (or *apostasy*) which then literally means “to stand away from” (as in the sense of wandering off in some other direction) or “out of stability” (as in the sense of stumbling or falling down). And so, it’s because of this word “*apostasy*” that we sometimes speak of people who started in the Christian faith and then left it as having “wandered from the right path” or as having “fallen”. They are *apostate*; that is, no longer standing up with us in the one true faith.

And St. Paul warns the Christians at Philippi (as well as the Christians gathered here today) not to be like those people who have become *apostate*. Instead, he says, “I want you to imitate me and use as your examples and guides others who are walking in the same path that we are.” Now, that might sound a little conceited – as if Paul were saying that he’s a perfect example of how a Christian ought to look and behave. “You want to know how to be a Christian? Watch me and do what I do.” But that’s not it. Context is everything here, because if you read what Paul writes immediately before this passage you know that he’s not

putting himself forth as a model of perfect Christian behavior but rather as a model of perfect faith and trust in Christ.

I mean if you just read what he says about those who are living as enemies of the cross of Christ, it sounds like he's talking about people who have fallen into patterns of licentiousness and obvious moral failure. For example, he speaks of people whose "gods are their bellies", and it sounds like he means extremely self-centered people who only live to eat and who are therefore guilty of greed and gluttony. He also says that their "glory is in their shameful deeds"; and it sounds like he means that they take pride in the worst things that they do – as if they were boasting about their acts of murder and adultery and so on. But that's really not what Paul has in mind here.

Now, don't get me wrong: that would indeed be a form of apostasy. If someone started out in the true faith and then fell into the kinds of behaviors I just mentioned – I mean actually adopting some kind of sinful lifestyle and being proud of it, well, it'd be clear that they were no longer standing in the faith. And this does indeed happen. People can and do get lured into temptations to sin and get stuck there. Then they get defensive about it and try to justify their behavior. Most of us have known people who professed to be Christians but who came to a point in their life when they said, "Nuts to it all. I'm tired of trying to live according to God's rules. I'll do what I want to do, and I don't care what anyone says. And besides, who are you to judge me?" And so off they go sinking deeper and deeper into whatever sin it is that they're being drawn to: drug or alcohol abuse, illicit affairs, homosexuality, whatever it happens to be. They live in ways that are clearly contrary to the Word and will of God. But that's the point: when they take the plunge it's pretty obvious. You know it and so do they. And so as sad and terrible as it is when it happens, at least at that point they become obvious candidates for conversion all over again. Our prayers and efforts are directed toward bringing them back to repentance and faith so that they will stand with us again.

More insidious and a lot more pervasive, however, is the different kind apostasy that Paul had in mind when he wrote this morning's text. And to understand what he means, you need to know that immediately prior to this passage Paul discusses what he was and the way he thought when he was a Pharisee. His problem then was not that he was living a life of obvious sin; but exactly the opposite: he thought he was doing everything right. He was immensely proud of his zeal for God's commands, the rigorous disciplines that he placed upon himself to enforce obedience, and the scrupulous way he tried to keep the laws and traditions handed down to him by generations of venerated rabbis and wise men. Paul tried to be perfect. And according to the standards he was using – the same standards of his peers – he was successful.

And then, Paul says, I met the risen Lord Jesus, and I came to understand that everything I was so proud of was worse than a pile of horse manure. (To be more precise, Paul uses a much cruder term for it. Use your imagination.) But when he met Christ, Paul came to understand that the sinner can do nothing but sin and that even his noblest achievements are corrupt and tainted because they stem from his sinful heart. The only thing that God counts as good and perfect is the righteousness of Christ granted through faith to those who trust in his death on the cross for sin. So, Paul says, I want to know more of Christ, I want to know more of the power of his resurrection, because these are the things that make me right with God; not anything I can do. In fact, the things I do only stand in the way, because to the degree that I think I'm doing good enough on my own, to that same degree I am denying Christ and what he did for me.

So, when Paul writes about those who are living as the enemies of the cross of Christ, he's not talking about obvious fallen sinners. He's talking about those in the church who think they're becoming increasingly more righteous through their efforts to be good Christians. There were those in his day who were teaching, "Okay, now that you've become a Christian, here's what you need to do: you've got to follow the Jewish dietary laws, and celebrate these Jewish festivals, and observe these fast days, and you Greek fellas, you've got to get circumcised." On and on it went. And people were buying into it – just as many do today. There's always a tendency for us to want to add what we do to what Christ did for us. The reason for that is that it gratifies the flesh. We want to think of ourselves as good people. We want God to be happy with us and our efforts to please him. But when we do this we subtly shift our trust from Christ's righteousness to our own. People who think of themselves as pretty good do not think they need a Savior from sin. In their minds they begin to become their own saviors – or at least their own "co-saviors" – and so they become the enemies of the cross of Christ even while professing to believe in it. And Paul says it breaks his heart to see it happen.

This is why, again, he warns the Philippian church (and us) to be careful: Stand up straight on Christ and his Gospel, and realize that there's a ditch on both sides of the road. You can fall into either one. So, on one side the Christian has to struggle against the weakness of the flesh that wants to succumb to temptations to sin. That's always there. On the other hand, the Christian must resist the self-delusion that by virtue of having become a believer in Jesus now his own efforts to please God are a part of achieving salvation. And of the two, the greater threat is usually the latter. It is certainly the one that is harder to see. But you remember that even historically, for the most part, Christ's greatest enemies were not the open sinners like Herod in today's Gospel reading who merely sought to destroy him; but those who pretended to be his friends like the Pharisees who, by trusting in their own righteousness, denied their need for him. Recall that in the end it was not the wicked Herod but the highly regarded religious people who condemned Jesus to death.

The same is true today. The true Gospel message is always an offense to people – especially to people who think of themselves as good and spiritual and religious. And what that means is that the true church and its faithful members are always going to be experiencing internal and external conflict. It happens to us because on an individual level, the wanton sinner and the self-righteous Pharisee are part of the makeup of each one of us. As so we try to stand on the Gospel path and make forward progress, both of these internal traitors are pulling us toward the ditch on his side. And what's happening to us on an individual level is multiplied when we gather in a group. At any given point in time, we're all at various points of being pulled left or right as we attempt to make our stand on Christ. And what sometimes happens is that whole churches and whole church bodies fall into the ditch on one side or the other. You've got some liberal churches that decide that sin isn't sin any more, and then you've got legalistic churches that fall into works righteousness. Either way, they remove Jesus from his role as Savior.

So we have an obligation to help each other. When we see someone leaning too far toward one side or the other, we attempt to steady them and get them to stand up straight on Christ again. And as we do, we use as our guides people like St. Paul who emphatically denounce both their sins and their so-called good works so that they can take their stand on Christ and his righteousness alone.

And no, because of these constant struggles forward progress is not going to be easy. But Christ our Lord said take up the cross and follow me – and crosses are by nature difficult to bear. And that's a bitter pill to swallow sometimes. I think it's fair to say that we all have a desire for a Christian life that's uncomplicated and for a church that's free of controversy. We want everyone to get along and agree with each other all the time. It's not going to happen in this life. If you yourself or the church that you attend is not constantly struggling with the issues fighting the sinful flesh on one side and resisting the tendency toward legalism on the other, then the chances are that you've already fallen into one ditch or the other.

So, recognizing our own natural predilections to wandering or falling in a ditch, we want to heed Paul's encouragement to stand up and stand firm on Christ. And as we move forward in faith, we want to be careful where we step: neither too far to the left nor to the right. And that should raise the question: "How do you keep your course true? If the going is as perilous as you say, how can I be sure that the steps I take are the right ones? How can I make sure that I continue to stand?" Paul answers these questions. And to help explain how, let me close with this illustration: when I was in the Army, I used to have to do a lot of land navigation. They'd give you a map and a compass and say this is where you are and this is where you need to be. Naturally there wouldn't be any roads or anything in between. You had to go cross country over rough terrain by dead reckoning. So you figured out what the compass heading was and off you went. But the way to ensure that you were always heading in the right direction was not to look down at your feet and watch each step; but rather to look up. You'd use your compass and sight along it to pick a distant object on the horizon that was in the direction you wanted to go and head straight for that. That way even if you had to go around obstacles like trees and what not, you were still always headed in the right direction.

And that's what Paul means when he says to get your mind off what's below and look up: put your focus on things above. There is your Savior from heaven, and that's where your true citizenship is. If you continue to look up toward the Savior and the goal to which he called you by faith, you'll be sure to stand up with him – both while you are on the way, and when he assembles all his saints in glory. We look up to Christ

in order to ensure that we stand up with him. And so, I say with St. Paul: *Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.* In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!