

### ***Best Regards***

In the name of him who receives sinners and welcomes them to his table, dear friends in Christ: Last week when we met for worship, we spent some time contrasting the way the world at large perceives things with the way things are seen and understood in the kingdom of God. And what we found is that the contrast could not be sharper. Take, for instance, the way a person's overall moral character or relative righteousness is established. The world, for its part, judges each person according to their total record of conduct. It's as if everybody's got a life long score sheet. You get positive points or credits for doing good things and negative points or demerits for behaving badly. And the way we decide whether you're an essentially good or bad person is to add up the score at any moment and see how you're doing. A very low or subzero score would tell us that you're rotten to the core, and a very high score would tell us that you're an extremely virtuous person.

So if we considered someone who's known to have been very good and helpful for a long time, a person who is honest, hardworking, generous, faithful to their spouse, outwardly religious, and generally godly in their conduct, if that person were then to fall rather stubbornly into a sin, we'd be likely to think, "Well, nobody's perfect. The good this person has done far outweighs the bad. They're still, overall, pretty decent.

On the other hand, if we took someone who's got a track record of being a notorious public sinner, who's rude, nasty, foul-mouthed, violent, been involved in criminal conduct, and what not – if that person finally arrives at the point of ruin – where you might expect such a life to lead – and then decides to turn over a new leaf and try to make amends, we're all likely to think, "Sorry, buddy; too little, too late. You're still a bad apple." You may remember a few years back when Stanley "Tookie" Williams, a convicted gang-banger, drug dealer, and murderer was trying to get off death row by writing and publishing a book aimed at children warning them not to "do the things I've done". He tried to use it as proof that he still had value to society and should therefore be spared the death penalty. I honestly don't remember what they decided in the end; but I do remember that the DA in the case thought that society would be better served without Tookie in the world because despite his recent literary achievement, he was still a very dangerous and violent criminal. The bad far outweighed the good. And that's pretty much the way the world sees it.

But then we come to the kingdom of God and we discover that this whole system of determining who's good and who's bad is thrown out the window. It turns out there's no such thing as a score sheet on each person. No, from the Lord's perspective, *if he were* keeping score like that, there'd be only one kind of person. Everybody would rate the same: as a completely corrupt, evil sinner who hates God, rebels against him continuously, and despises his Word. Fortunately for us, the Lord isn't keeping score like that. Because from his point of view there are only bad people in the world, he uses a different standard – a different way of seeing people. What is precious in the eyes of the Lord is repentance. What he values most in humans is a spirit broken over its sin and a contrite heart that looks to him for forgiveness and salvation through the shed blood of his Son Jesus Christ.

He doesn't care about any track record. If you are someone whose history of righteous deeds is so wonderful that it makes the lifelong charitable work of someone like Mother Teresa appear to be less than nothing, and you then fall into a sin from which you refuse to repent, then that's all the Lord sees: a black-hearted, hate-spitting rebel who's headed for hell. And if you are the sort of person whose sins would make Adolf Hitler appear to be a saint by comparison, and you then confess your guilt to the Lord and trust in his Word of forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, then that's all the Lord sees: his holy child whose soul is as sinless and white as the driven snow. That's how our heavenly Father sees people. They are either in Christ and covered by his righteousness or they are outside of Christ covered with the stinking filth of their sins.

The Scripture readings we have before us this morning tell us that we who are in our Father's kingdom should see all people exactly the same way – from our Father's point of view – through his eyes, as it were. This is what Paul is saying in the Epistle: "From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh", that is, the way the world sees them with its system of evaluation. No, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

Do you count yourself forgiven in Christ? Do you trust that he has washed away all your sins and clothed you in his own perfection? Do you? Yes? Then you are compelled to regard every other confessing Christian exactly the same way.

This is hammered home for us in our Lord's story of the prodigal son. And it's important to consider the context in which Jesus tells this story. He's being criticized by the legalistic Pharisees who, from a worldly perspective, see themselves as good people – and outwardly they are. They're coming down hard on Jesus because he is freely associating with known public sinners who have come to repentance and faith in him. The Pharisees can only see what these people used to be: the worst kind of sinners. Jesus regards them from a divine point of view – as they have now become through faith in him: sinless and pure. And he tells the Pharisees the story as a direct response to their incorrect way of seeing the situation. These sinners were in the sandals of the prodigal son. They rebelled against their heavenly Father and went their way in wild, reckless living. But now they've come home. They recognized the error of their ways, saw the certain destruction to which that wide and easy way was taking them, and they turned back. They've been received by Christ. They've heard his word of forgiveness. And through Jesus they have been welcomed and restored by God the Father. And all heaven rejoices because those who were lost have been found. Those who were dead in sin are now alive in Christ.

But who's not rejoicing? Who's got their noses out of joint? Why, it's the Pharisees, of course, whom Jesus now casts in the role of the indignant older brother – the one who's furious. He's angry with his father for his lavish grace, and he's still holding his brother's sins against him – sins that the father has forgiven and forgotten. And isn't that interesting: because the father, the only one who has a right to judge his children, didn't condemn his younger brother like he thought he should, the older brother takes the role of judge upon himself. And he ends up condemning both his father and his brother; which, not coincidentally, is exactly same thing that Satan does. He holds the law over sinners and he despises the Lord because of his love and grace.

This is the same thing we do when we regard one another – or any one of us in particular – who are in Christ according to sins of which they have since repented. When you do that, when you look at a brother or sister in Christ and think, “The Lord may have forgiven you; but I don’t. I know what you are. I remember what you did. And I’m not letting you off so easy” – when you have thoughts like that, you cast yourself in the role of the older brother—which is the role of the Pharisees and Satan. And it’s important to see who is outside of the Father’s house at the end of the story. It’s not the younger brother. It’s the older one. And let me add this: even if he were to go into the party, as his father pleads with him to do, if internally he were still fuming on account of what he believes to be the injustice of the situation, then his heart would still be outside the house. What I’m saying is that you can stand here in the congregation of God’s people and yet be as far away from home as the prodigal son ever was on account of your judgmental thoughts against other people who are in Christ and who have been received and forgiven by him. And if that’s the case, then just like the prodigal son, you need to repent of your sin and come home to your Father’s ready embrace.

We have no warrant to hold other people’s sins against them if they are in Christ. It’s downright blasphemous for us to take the role of judge upon ourselves. That’s God’s job; not ours. If he has forgiven, how dare any one of us hold a grudge? If they are reconciled to God through Christ, how dare any one of us who claim to be in Christ not also be reconciled to them? If you regard yourself as forgiven in Christ – if you trust the Word and promises of God – then you have no choice but to regard others who are in Christ exactly the same way—with what I’m calling your best regards: forgiven, cleansed, and free.

Now I know there will be some objections – the inevitable “What if’s?” There’s no way in the world I could answer them all, and I seriously doubt that you would forgive me if I took the time to try. I’ll tackle a couple of the most obvious ones; but before I do, I think it’s safe to say that the vast majority of objections that I won’t address are simply excuses we use to justify our ungodly anger toward and condemnation of others. In most cases, it’s not that we don’t know what the answer is; it’s that we don’t like it. That’s the older brother in us – the one who needs to repent.

That being said, one objection that may arise would have to do with the nature of the sin in question – the idea that some sins are so despicable or damaging that there can be no complete reconciliation and restoration. Take a case in which a dearly loved and much respected pastor is discovered to be having an extramarital affair with a woman in the congregation. This is devastating to a church. The members feel so hurt and betrayed, and it can really shake people’s faith and cause them to doubt the very power of the Gospel to know that the man they looked up to as an example of godly living turned out to be a complete hypocrite. Or take the case of a youth leader or teacher who is discovered to be sexually abusing the youngsters in his charge. Surely, you might think, in cases such as these, we have a right – perhaps even the duty – to hold the guilty in contempt no matter how repentant they are.

The short response to that is that if that’s what you think, then you really don’t understand the Gospel of God’s grace in Christ. Forgiven in Christ is forgiven. Period. If it were anything else, *you* could have no assurance of the forgiveness of *your own* sins. That being said, it doesn’t mean that there aren’t temporal consequences of such sins. A pastor who so violates his sacred calling is no longer fit to serve as a minister of Christ’s Church. He must leave his office; but that doesn’t mean he’s to be shunned and

despised. If he has repented, then he is to be regarded as a brother in Christ. Likewise with the other example – the fellow will probably go to jail for violating the criminal code, as indeed he should. But that doesn't give us the right to remain bitter and angry with him. If he has repented, that's it. His sins however monstrous are washed away. And when he returns from prison, he ought to be welcomed as a brother in Christ. Just the same, he ought not return to working with youth; not because he isn't forgiven and restored, but for the same reason a recovering alcoholic ought not to work as a bartender.

Another objection might be made by the victim of someone else's sin. The person would say, "Oh, it's just dandy that sinner's right with God; the trouble is that they sinned against me! And they haven't asked me for *my* forgiveness – and until they do, I'm not going to give it." This is an awfully dangerous position to take: to imagine that my forgiveness should be somehow harder to receive than God's. I guess I outrank him, huh? I don't think we want to go there. If the Lord has granted forgiveness and restoration, by what right do I withhold the hand of fellowship?

Okay, a final objection would be a case in which the sin is ongoing and the person has not yet come to repentance. This is a different situation altogether; still, the question is: How should we regard such a person? Since they haven't repented, maybe it's okay for me to look upon them with anger and disdain. After all, the person is a black-hearted sinner in rebellion against God. True enough. But even though that's true, consider how the father in the parable regards his wayward son. The boy has shown nothing but contempt for his father and has scorned his father's godly instruction to pursue a life of sin. Still, the father doesn't see his son as an enemy. There's no anger or hostility in his heart; just a deep, longing ache – an emptiness that waits in fervent hope of being filled if and when his prodigal son wakes up, comes to his senses, and returns home. He understands that the boy is deceived by sin and its promise of pleasure, and that he's headed for ruin unless he repents. And so he regards his son with pity and compassion as he prays fervently for the day of his safe return home. This is how we too should regard those who have gone astray.

Why? Because through Christ we are in the kingdom of God. We've been forgiven and restored through his sacrifice on the cross. And as heirs of God's heavenly kingdom, we are to regard no one according to the flesh; but to regard them as our Father does: the repentant as sinless and pure in Christ, and the unrepentant as lost brothers and sisters who deserve our compassion and for whose safe return we pray.

For our past and present failures to regard others as we should, let us therefore repent with hearts full of genuine sorrow. And receiving again Christ's assurance that for his sake we have been forgiven and restored, let us resolve to see each other not according to the flesh, but according to God's Holy Spirit – from our Father's point of view – that we may give everyone our very best regards. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***