

Consider Yourself Dead

In the name of him with whom the Father is well pleased, dear friends in Christ: As a general rule, if someone tells you, “You’re dead” you know it’s not good. It’s usually meant as a threat – and here context is everything. If, for example, it’s someone that you just played a practical joke on who tells you “You’re dead”, it means that they’re planning to get even with you, presumably by making you the victim of a practical joke of their own; that, or simply by beating you senseless in retaliation. But if, on the other hand, it’s a member of an organized crime syndicate whom you are scheduled to testify against that tells you this, you best take the matter a lot more seriously and see about getting yourself into a witness protection program. Then again, if it’s a doctor who examines you and says that you’re dead, you won’t be able to hear it. But from an overall health perspective, it’s still not good.

So, like I said, as a rule, you don’t want someone to tell you, “You’re dead.” But rules sometimes have exceptions, and this is one of them. In today’s Epistle the Apostle Paul tells us all, “You’re dead”, and he says that we should consider ourselves to be so. But he means this in a positive sense. In his context being declared dead is a good thing, because what he’s doing is working out for us the effects and implications of our having been baptized into Christ Jesus. In order to explain this, I’m going to have to back up a bit and show how these startling words of St. Paul that tell us we’re dead fit into the grand scheme of the magnum opus that is his letter to Christian Church at Rome.

The letter is by far the finest and clearest presentation of the Christian faith that we have. In it Paul carefully builds the case for Christ, step by each meticulous step, scripturally, logically, inescapably leading his hearers to faith in Jesus the Savior.

After the opening introduction, Paul devotes the first three and a half chapters to showing how all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, that is, people who have God’s Word and those who don’t, are all equally condemned by the Law of God and rightly under his wrath and judgment. By the time he’s done, Paul leaves every one of us on our faces before the Lord trembling with fear and with absolutely nothing to say in our defense. “I’m guilty, guilty, guilty, and deserve to be cast into hell forever.”

And right there, when he’s got you to that point, he suddenly changes direction. It’s as if you can already feel the heat of the fires of hell singeing your skin and out of nowhere comes this cool, refreshing breeze to the rescue. He begins to explain how the Lord has prepared and revealed to us a way to stand before him in the judgment and to be declared completely righteous in his sight – not by obeying the Law (he’s already proven there’s no hope in that) – but by trusting in Jesus Christ. What we were powerless to do, he did for us. Though he is eternal God, yet for our sakes he became a man, lived a perfect life without sin, and then offered that life as a sacrifice of atonement on the cross; thus appeasing the wrath of God and satisfying his Law’s righteous demands. A sinful person is reckoned righteous by God not by doing anything, but simply by believing in what Christ has done. This is the wonderful Good News, which, when one receives by faith, they are credited with the righteousness of God.

In chapters four and five, then, Paul expounds on this idea. First, he shows how that this teaching is not a new and novel doctrine that he’s pulling out of thin air, but rather this has been God’s plan and the primary thrust of the biblical storyline from the very start. The Old

Testament saints were reckoned righteous by God too, not by what they did but by their trusting in the Savior God promised to send them. Paul describes Jesus as the new and better Adam. When Adam our first father sinned, he brought all mankind under the curse of death. But Jesus, by his holy life and innocent suffering and death, brings righteousness and life to all. Just as in Adam all die; in Christ all are made alive.

Paul goes on to explain that it isn't just Adam's sin that causes us trouble: we've got plenty of our own too. The mistake is to think that God gave us his Holy Law to make us better – as if we could achieve some acceptable level of righteousness of our own by trying to obey it. We can't. Instead, Paul tells us, that the Lord gave us his Law to show us how completely corrupted by sin we are; how that everything we think, say, and do is an offense in the sight of God. The Law is meant to show us our desperate need for Christ and his saving work, for, as Paul explains, where sin abounds, all the more the grace of God abounds to those who trust in Jesus.

That brings us up to chapter six of Romans, the beginning of which is today's Epistle. In light of what he's said up to this point, Paul asks a rhetorical question, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" And I need to stress that this is a logical conclusion of what he's said. If the more I sin the more of God's grace and forgiveness I get, then maybe I ought to dedicate myself to sinning all the more. That way I get more of God's grace – and who doesn't want that? Grace is good, right?

It is indeed a *logical* conclusion, but it's also one hundred percent wrong. Paul condemns this line of reasoning in the strongest possible terms. The "By no means!" we read in the English text doesn't begin to capture the emphatic Greek expression Paul used when he wrote this. He then asks, "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" It's a good question. What did sin get any of us, anyway? Let's see: the wrath of God, sickness, sorrow, pain and suffering, ruined relationships, disappointment, decay, and death – oh, and a sentence to eternal hellfire. You've got to admit that this whole experiment with sin that our race has been toying with hasn't worked out at all well for us. And I'd be willing to bet that no one here has ever benefitted long term from any sin. Oh, I won't deny that there may have been short term pleasures; but sin always hurts someone, even if it's only yourself. No, sin is the source of all our problems. It's not the solution to anything.

It's also unnecessary, which is the main point Paul is making in today's text. He asks, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" He's saying that your Baptism was not just a symbolic ritual. No, in your Baptism something miraculous happened. God connected you with Christ. Or to be more precise, he placed you *in* Christ, so that from his perspective what happened to him happened also to you. His death for your sin became the death of your sinful self. Your "burial" in the water was his burial in the tomb. And his resurrection – the proof that all sins had been paid for and the righteous demands of the Law had been satisfied – became your resurrection as well: the birth of the new person free of sin and its curse and able to live before God in righteousness.

Now, it happens that in the "already and not yet" present, we who have been baptized have two natures within us. There is the sinful old self, and the righteous new self. The first is doomed to die and one day it will for good. The latter will live forever. And later, especially in chapter seven of Romans, Paul will explain how these two natures we have are locked in mortal combat. But for the present, in today's text, Paul tells us how we are to think of these two natures especially when facing temptations of various kinds.

Before he had rhetorically asked, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” Like I said, it is a logical conclusion. But ask yourself this: which of my two natures would be inclined to think that way? Which nature would say, “This Gospel of God’s grace in Christ means I can go on sinning with impunity. It’s like a license to sin. The Law can’t touch me! I’m forgiven! And the more I sin, the more forgiveness I get. What a deal! Look out world, I’m going to keep on sinning like crazy!”? Which of your natures would say that? Let me give you a hint: it’s not the new nature.

That means, by careful process of elimination, it must be your old sinful nature that thinks that way. And this is where Paul invokes the continuing power of your Baptism to put such thoughts to death where they belong for they come from the nature in you that is dead – that has been crucified with Christ. He says, “We know that [in Baptism] our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For the one who has died has been set free from sin.”

He’s saying that as a baptized believer you don’t need to let the sinful old nature sit in the driver’s seat of your life. That’s not a good idea anyway, because dead people have terrible driving records. They always wreck the car. Don’t let them drive. Unseat that person. Get their cold, stiff hands off the wheel. Put them in the backseat – or better yet, the trunk. Let your new, living nature take charge and direct your thoughts and actions. Consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

How do you do that exactly? This is where Luther is helpful. In the Small Catechism, in the section on Baptism he asks, “What does baptizing with water indicate?” He replies, “It indicates that the Old Adam is us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” It’s as simple (and often as difficult) as that. The old nature is put to death by contrition and repentance. So, when it rears its ugly head, when you feel the desire to do or to say something wrong, or when you begin to dwell on unwholesome thoughts, recognize where it’s coming from and nip it in the bud. Put it to death by repentance. And remember the gift of your new life by your Baptism into Christ. Let that person drive.

And no, we’re not talking about attaining sinless perfection here. In this life, as long as you still have the two natures within you, that rotting dead corpse will always stink up the car. But it need not be in charge. In view of your Baptism, consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!