

The First Sunday after Michaelmas
Ephesians 4:22-28: "In Jesus, We Leave Our Sinful Past Behind."
October 3/4, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Hear us, O Lord, as we come to You burdened with our guilt, and bow in faith at Your feet. Speak to us Your word of absolution; say to our souls, "Your sins be forgiven You"; that with good courage we may rise up and go forth to serve You, now and all our days, to the glory of Your holy name. Amen. (*Parish Prayers*, ed. Frank Colquhoun, p. 125)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fourth chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

[You were taught in Christ] to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. / Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, whose blood cleanses us from every sin and frees us from our guilty conscience, so that we can live our lives in joyful service to Him, dear fellow redeemed:

A person who enters the witness protection program is required to leave behind nearly everything familiar to him. His immediate family may go with him, but he must walk away from his extended family and his friends. There can be no phone calls exchanged, no text messaging, and no social media contact. He can never return to the place where he lived in case someone there might recognize him.

Those in the program would have to get used to a totally new community in a new place with no family and friend network to help. This would be hard to do and lonely. But at the same time, there is something appealing about the idea. Haven't you ever thought how nice it could be to have a completely fresh start? To go someplace where no one knows your family, no one knows your past, and you can just be you? There is comfort in the familiar, but there is excitement and possibility in the unknown.

In today's Epistle, the apostle Paul urges us to **Leave Our Sinful Past Behind**, to walk away from our corrupt and destructive habits that weaken and endanger our faith. And he urges us to live **in Jesus**, to go forward in His righteousness and holiness with His blessing.

What are some of the things that should be left behind? Paul told the Christians in Ephesus to abandon an immature approach to spiritual things. They need to take God's Word seriously and study it, so they are not *"tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes"* (Eph. 4:14). They should give up all sexual immorality, sensuality, and impurity (4:19, 5:3-5). And they should put away falsehood, anger, and thievery.

At the center of these words is the idea that the life and behavior of believers should look different than the life and behavior of unbelievers. What is it that makes them different? The believer and unbeliever may have had a similar upbringing. They may have grown up in the same community and worked at the same business. They may have participated in the same activities and had the same friends.

But as similar as they seem to be, they are very different. One of them walks in the light while the other walks in darkness. One of them is clothed in the spotless garments of Jesus' righteousness, while the other displays the filthy rags of sin. One of them lives for his neighbor and looks for the life to come, while the other thinks of his own interests and focuses intently on this life. One of them lives under God's favor, while the other lives under God's frown.

Paul wrote to remind the Ephesian Christians of this tremendous difference. "You are not as you used to be," he said. At one time they, like the unbelievers, were *"separated from Christ... having no hope and without God in the world"* (Eph. 2:12). But now they had been *"brought near by the blood of Christ"* (v. 13). Now they had become *"fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God"* (v. 19).

Through Holy Baptism, they were adopted as God's sons. They were joined to the body of Christ and given new life in Him. They were cleansed of their sins and covered in His righteousness. They were no longer agents of Satan carrying out his plans. Now they were set apart for the Lord's work, called to serve His purposes.

The Christians in Ephesus already knew these things. They knew what the Lord had done for them and what they were called to do. So why did Paul have to remind them? He had to remind them because it is easy to slip into old habits, to fall back into one's *"former manner of life."* This is because we still have the old Adam in us, the sinful nature, and the devil and the unbelieving world are working tirelessly to draw us away from what is good.

They succeed all too often. We're at the point in our day that the way many Christians think about right and wrong is no different than the way non-Christians do. We see this across the board in views regarding sexuality, marriage, family, business practices, stewardship of money and possessions, and the treatment of another person's reputation. God has called us to stand up for what is right, to push back against the corruption and deceit of the devil and our own flesh, and to speak the truth.

But we do the opposite. We go along with the world. We don't want to stand out. We don't want to have a target on our backs. We don't want to be the bad guy or the prude, who tells people that what they are doing is wrong. So we keep our mouths shut. We might talk big when

we are around those who agree with us, but otherwise we clam up. The silence is deafening, and for those we fail to warn, it could very well be damning.

You can think of times when you should have spoken up but didn't, when you failed to tell the truth even if it was a hard truth. Maybe you wanted to keep peace in your family or maintain your standing in your workplace or community. Maybe you didn't feel qualified to speak up because of your checkered past. Maybe you told yourself that someone else would step up and do the "heavy lifting" for you. Maybe the time to talk never seemed to present itself.

But as much as you tried to justify your inactivity, you feel guilty about it. You know what God says in His Word. You know His standard for moral conduct does not change no matter what the world thinks about it. You know that the person who speaks the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) has nothing to be ashamed of before God. So you are disgusted with yourself for lacking the courage to do and speak and live according to His will.

This is why the words of today's text are so comforting. St. Paul was writing to people in Ephesus who are just like you and me, people who are weak, who struggle, who fall into old habits, and who fail to speak the truth when they should. The solution for them and for us? Repentance and faith in Jesus. Paul describes repentance as "*putting off your old self.*" "Cast aside the garments of your sin," he says. "Take your sinful past to the cleaners. Admit your wrongs. Acknowledge your transgressions. Expose your sinful passions. Hang all that dirty business out to dry!"

And then he says, "*be renewed in the spirit of your mind.*" Let your mind and heart be cleansed anew by the blood of Jesus, so that no guilt and sin remain. "[P]ut on the new self," created and gifted by God in the image of His own righteousness and holiness. It sounds like we are responsible for doing these things—being renewed in our mind, putting on the new self. But this is really God's work accomplished through His Word and Sacraments.

God does these things through the Gospel. The Gospel "*is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*" (Rom. 1:16). The Gospel message of our salvation through Jesus at the same time brings us forgiveness and it strengthens us. It declares us righteous before God and increases our growth in righteousness in this life. It delivers both our justification and our sanctification.

The Gospel delivers our justification by delivering Jesus' righteousness under the Law. His righteousness is the reason we are now counted righteous before God. And His atoning death on the cross is the reason we are forgiven. Whatever wrongs we have done in the past or whatever good we have left undone—all those sinful spots were washed out by the blood of Jesus. We no longer wear the filthy garment of sin. We wear the glorious robes of Jesus' perfection. When the Father looks at us, He sees Jesus, His beloved Son.

The Gospel also delivers our sanctification by the work of Jesus in us. He comes to us to help us grow and improve in Christian living. He works in us the desire for and dedication to the truth by filling our ears with His saving Word of salvation. He frees us from the need for revenge by filling our hearts with His forgiveness. And He moves us to generosity by giving us more than enough for the needs of our body and soul.

He lays out a blessed future for us unaffected by the failures of our past. We may never live down the wrongs we have done among those who know us. But Jesus forgives every one of our sins—even the big ones. We don't have to enter some sort of spiritual witness protection to hide our sins from others or from God Himself.

We deal with our sins before God by repenting of them, by putting them off and leaving them at the foot of Jesus' cross. The cross is where Jesus paid for our sins completely and where He secured a bright future for us. Because of what He did, we are not stuck in our sinful past. **In Jesus, We Leave Our Sinful Past Behind.** Now we go forward in righteousness, in holiness, and in love according to His abundant grace.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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