

August 11, 2024

Ephesians 4:17-24

“The Way You Learned Christ!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 N. Oakland Ave.
Decatur, Illinois 62526

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

What a gift it is to know and believe that our sins are forgiven in Jesus. That powerful pardon at the cross of our Savior is such a relief from horrible guilt and shame that we earnestly want to walk in newness of life without ever going back to the sewage we left behind. But it doesn't take very long for us to realize that the good that we so eagerly want to do is quickly assaulted with powerful desires that are contrary to the love of God in Christ Jesus. No one is immune from these evil desires or appetites - these hungers that torture us. It is not easy to be a Christian by any stretch of the imagination. We know and feel that the desires of the sinful flesh are against the desires of the Spirit.

We cannot stop these powerful and evil desires or hungers from assaulting us. However, when these wicked appetites would attempt to drive us to sin, that is, to gratify them, we are bid by Scripture to see that these hungers are the same old sewage we left behind, so that we repent of them and seek forgiveness through Christ, and embrace the righteousness of faith while putting evil desires to death. In this way, it is actually good that we are aware of our sinful appetites, for God uses them to exercise our certainty in Christ and the forgiveness of sins and our hope of one day being in heaven. Luther writes:

Through such an opportunity a Christian becomes a skillful artisan and a wonderful creator, who can make joy out of sadness, comfort out of terror, righteousness out of sin, and life out of death, when he restrains his flesh for this purpose, brings it into submission, and subjects it to the Spirit. Those who become aware of the desires of their flesh should not immediately despair of their salvation on that account. It is all right for them to be aware of it, provided that they do not assent to it; it is all right for anger or sexual desire to be aroused in them, provided that they do not capitulate to it; it is all right for sin to stir them up, provided that they do not gratify it. In fact, the godlier one is, the more aware he is of the conflict (pg. 74).

Luther is not here minimizing sin. He is fully acknowledging that we are wretched! We do not always feel very Christian. There is something wrong with us. We are in an ongoing, raging battle, but that does not mean the we have lost faith, nor should it be used as an excuse to pursue sin. Again, Luther:

It often happens that a man is so fiercely attacked by anger, hatred, impatience, sexual desire, mental depression, or some other desire of the flesh that he simply cannot get rid of it, no matter how much he wants to. What is he to do? Should he despair on this account? No, but he should say: "My flesh is battling and raging against the Spirit. Let it rage as long as it pleases! But you do not give in to it. Walk by the Spirit, and be led by Him, so that you do not gratify its desires. If you do this, you are free of the Law." Of course, it will accuse and frighten you; but it will do so in vain." In such a battle of the flesh against the Spirit, therefore, there is nothing better than to have the Word in view and to draw from it the comfort of the Spirit (pg. 78).

When your conscience screams, "don't do it!" then don't do it! This is what Paul is warning us about when he says in our epistle lesson for this morning: "Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must

no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not **the way you learned Christ!**” The warning is clear. Faith is fragile and under attack. In this fallen creation, where our sinful flesh presents itself as a constant danger, faith needs to be continually fed with the gospel and sacraments to survive. Faith is never preserved by our good works, but sins against conscience destroy faith. Thus, our sinful nature needs the law so that sin may continue to be recognized as utterly sinful, paving the way for our faith to be strengthened by the gospel of forgiveness and the hope of heaven. **The Way You Learned Christ** leads to being engaged in a battle with the strength of Jesus and his great salvation. But what shall we say when or if we fail - in those moments we fall?

Here we may point to king David, who sinned against conscience by having relations with the wife of Uriah so that she became pregnant, and when he realized that Uriah would find out, he had him killed. If Paul had lived in the time of king David, the very words of our epistle lesson would have served as a powerful warning to him. David already had similar words from Moses and the prophets that should have turned him away from such actions, but the words of Paul in our lesson are a most appropriate warning as well, especially for us in the New Testament. Avoid sins of conscience that lead to hardness of heart. Such sins can become a callous so that one begins to lose feeling. And as we look around at this unbelieving world, what do we see? We see that they sadly have lost feeling.

Now, if we are currently lost as king David was, or if it ever happens that we crush our faith and are struck in terror by what we have done, we should find our consolation in the words that Nathan the prophet spoke to David in 2 Samuel 12:13, “The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die.” In Psalm 51 David writes in the context of his sin: “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.” And this the Lord mercifully did for David. In repentance, the Lord will do the same for us. As David trusted in the coming Savior and was forgiven, so we also are forgiven through faith in Jesus who has come. And we might add that Paul writes in Gal. 6:1, “... if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”

So it is that no Christian in this life will avoid temptation. Paul, in our epistle lesson exhorts us to overcome temptation in **The Way We Learned Christ**. He was tempted as we are - for us - yet was without sin. He is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. It says in Hebrews 4:16, “let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” But if we fail by sinning against our conscience and are struck in godly sorrow, then we should run to the cross of Christ and find true peace in the removal of guilt. This is our comfort to an accusing conscience. And it is in the forgiveness of our sins - the powerful pardon of Christ - that we are then strengthened to do battle and overcome the same temptation when it comes along again.

Indeed! Paul is saying to us that the gospel of Jesus makes us different than the Gentiles who are darkened in their understanding and alienated from the life of God due to the ignorance that is in them in the hardening of their hearts. Our hearts have been broken in godly sorrow and raised in the cross of Jesus

Christ and his powerful pardon of all our sins - no matter how great those sins may be. It is no wonder, then, that Paul powerfully exhorts the Christians in our lesson, as well as us, "But that is not the way you learned Christ! - assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, 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." We have not learned in Christ the art of sinning against the conscience. We have learned from Christ to die to sin and live in righteousness. Christ did not save us from sins to be eager sinners, but to free us from the sewage of sin and death.

Paul makes this perfectly clear when he speaks of Baptism as a cleansing flood in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He writes in Romans 6:4-11,

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that 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 one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Jesus has set us free from sin! This he did by applying to us his very death and resurrection by the Holy Spirit in Baptism. Our sins have been washed away! And, as death no longer has dominion over him, we are to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. This is **The Way We Learned Christ** - forgiveness - powerful pardon - rest from sin and death! Sin is brought to nothing through what Jesus has done so that we are no longer enslaved to it. Praise be to God!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott

All of the quotes from Luther are found in Volume 27 of Luther's Works (American Edition), *Lectures on Galatians*, Concordia Publishing House, 1964. If you have a copy, I would encourage you to read pages 20-105.