

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – August 11th, 2024
THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

Prayer

Lord, grant us grace through the Holy Spirit to think, speak, and act more like Jesus every day.

AMEN

Sin – Part I

In today's Epistle reading, Paul continues to instruct and encourage his congregation, and us, to be imitators of Christ, as children adopted and beloved by God the Father.

He begins by making the contrast between the Gentiles, those non-Jews who didn't have the written law, and their Jewish counterparts. But that didn't excuse the Gentiles, since they, like all people, have the law that God has written on men's hearts.

His describes their sinful condition in verse 19:

They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

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Seems to resonate with our current social condition, if the opening ceremony of the Olympics was any indication. We should also realize, however, that:

(1) Jesus died for those sins of sensuality and impurity as much as He died for yours and mine and (2) we should not try to rank or categorize sins; ALL sin is evil but saying that some sins (i.e. the ones we commit) are somehow not as bad as others (i.e. the ones THEY commit) is to devalue the holiness of God.

Sin – Part II

Paul continues to provide examples of various types of sin in the next several verses.

We lie to each other (verse 25): Have any of you ever answered the questions “how are you,” asked on the patio on a Sunday morning with either a half-truth or an outright lie – saying “OK,” “good,” or “fine” when you’re not? We may tell a third person something about a mutual friend that we would deny ever saying when asked directly. We can pass along misinformation as if it were true. Telling each other lies is one of the ways in which the body of Christ is fighting against itself.

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We get angry with one another (verses 26 & 27): This most often happens within our natural families, given the time spent together and the long history of interactions. Our emotional response of anger can be reflexive and may happen so fast we're angry before we know it. And while scripture does talk about a 'righteous anger,' the times when our anger is truly that are few and far between. Paul strongly suggests that we resolve anger quickly, so it doesn't fester and become a grudge or a root of bitterness.

We steal (verses 28): I don't know if any of you have robbed a bank or stolen a car, and maybe some of us think we've kept this commandment. Reflect on these questions:

- Have you ever lied on your timecard, expense reports, or tax return and therefore stolen from your employer or the government?
- Have you ever borrowed something and 'forgotten' to return it?
- Have you ever used the resources of your employer or school for personal reasons without first asking them or reimbursing them?

I'm sure that you can think of other examples as well.

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We have bad attitudes that get expressed in words and deeds

(verses 31): Just to make sure that he covers all the bases, Paul ends verse 31 with a general catch-all of avoiding “all malice” or in another translation “all types of evil behavior.”

Paul doesn't just talk about what we should not do, but also gives us direction as to what we should do. But how can we, given our sin nature? Only by the grace of God!

Justification

Our God is not the gods of the Greeks and Romans, who were mere projections of their worshippers, with added powers but often flawed – not unlike the superheroes we follow in comic books and movies today. Our God is God of justice and consistency, one who sent Jesus, His only Son, to become incarnate, take upon himself the sins of the entire world, and then be justly punished by death for those sins that you and I committed.

Paul reminds us (verse 30) that we have been marked by the cross, both upon our head and upon our heart, at our baptism and that the

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Father has adopted us as members of His royal family and has sealed us with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In his explanation of the 3rd article of the creed, Luther reminds us that we contribute nothing but our sins to this process:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ.

Sanctification

In verses 23 and 24, Paul encourages both his original hearers and us:

to be renewed in the spirit of your minds and to put on the new self

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We must understand that, unlike our adoption, an act that took place once in space and time, that the renewal is an ongoing, life-long process. And most importantly, one size does NOT fit all. The methods used by God and the sins that we think, say, or do less often may not be the same as those of our neighbor. That's one of the reasons why Paul encouraged us to (Eph 4:1b-2)

*walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, **bearing with one another in love***

The sin that is easy for you to avoid may be difficult for me and vice-versa. And in all cases, Paul calls us to (verse 32)

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Vocation

Just like the picture on the cover of the bulletin, we need to be with Jesus for this transformation to happen. Luckily for us, the comforter, the Holy Spirit has been given to us so that God is with us 24/7, 365 days a year. Our problem is that we often don't realize this; we ignore

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or don't act upon the prompting of the Holy Spirit in our lives on a day-to-day basis. We separate our "God Time" from the rest of our lives, be it the hour or two on Sunday mornings, reading the verse of the day, or listening to Christian podcasts or radio.

I would commend to you a little book from the 1600's by Brother Lawrence titled "*The Practice of the Presence of God.*" In it, he talks about how he learned to commune with God continuously, not only in church or personal devotions, but also as he worked in the kitchen, ran errands, or listened to people - In other words, as he carried out the daily tasks of his vocation, doing the good works that God had prepared beforehand for him to.

It's my prayer that the Spirit would equip and enable all of us to do likewise, through the means of grace that He so richly and freely provides.

AMEN