

"Now"

Romans 8:1-11

April 10, 2011

5th Sunday In Lent

We live in the “instant information age”. No longer are we content to wait three days for a letter to be mailed and received in order to gain information. We won’t wait until after 11:00 PM or until the weekend to make a phone call and get a cheaper rate. We are in the age of computers and e-mails. But we are speeding past that, as well. Now, sending an email from a seat in front of a computer is not fast enough. We live in an age of instant messages, tweets, and texts sent from anywhere at any time from cell phones and iPads. If a message is important enough, then we demand to have it now (if not sooner).

I believe that this is one reason for the decline of interest in Christianity. No, I’m not blaming technology for that, but the desire and the demand for instantaneous communication. It’s just that Christianity is seen to be too slow. The message of Christianity is all about the future – about what God will do when Jesus comes again. All the benefits of Christianity are seen as being in the future – the distant future.

People can react one of two ways to this perception. Some may be indifferent to Christianity or reject Christianity all together because the message and the pay off are so far off in the future. Christianity, they think, has nothing to say or convey today.

Some may have an entirely different reaction. They see the future message of Christianity and the distant blessings as meaning there is time to get ready and prepare for them – to get our act together, as they say. The present message, they say, is an urgent encouragement to get for when the promises of Christianity finally come true. Now is the time to get saved! Now is the time to change your behavior and improve your morality. Judgment day is coming. You’ve got to be ready for that. But you never know if you are ready or not. Judgment day is shrouded in the dark haze of the distant future.

In each of these cases, these people are “those who live according to the flesh” and have “set their minds on the things of the flesh.” For many, those phrases imply dark evil “sins of the flesh.” In reality, to live “according to the flesh” and to set one’s mind “on the things of the flesh” mean simply to live and think according to human reason.

Those who are indifferent to the Gospel of Jesus Christ or reject it completely are condemned. As Paul says, “To set the mind on the flesh (to think according to human reason) is death.” The death here is not simply the end of breathing and brain waves after a time of life here on this earth. This death is an eternal death in the depths of hell.

Yet, at the same time, those who are worried about the future, about getting saved, and about improving their behavior so they stand a better chance on judgment day are also setting their minds on the flesh and are equally condemned. The Law of God sets a standard of perfection for obedience. It is utter foolishness to think that we can somehow love God enough to make a decision to accept His salvation. Paul says that “the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God.” By nature, we are neither neutral nor friendly to God. We are His enemies because of sin.

It is also foolish to think we can improve our behavior enough to make any sort of difference with God. We’d like to think that we could see the requirements of the law of God, understand them, and choose to obey them if we try hard enough. That’s not true. Not only do we not obey God’s Law, but we can’t. Paul is very clear on this. “[The mind that is set on the flesh] does not submit to God’s law; indeed it cannot.”

There is no hope in ourselves no matter how hard we try. There is no hope for the future in our behavior no matter how much time we have. Paul is rather blunt about the whole thing: “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

All of that is true only if the message of the Gospel is all about the future and all of the benefits are all upcoming. The fact of the matter is the message of the Gospel is more immediate than any tweet and the benefits of the Gospel are more instant than any instant message.

The message of the Gospel is so fast that it is already in the past. Submission to God's Law and obedience to God's Law by us now and in the future are unable to alleviate our guilt, put us into a right relationship with God, or save us from death and damnation. So God took care of the matter in the past before we were even born.

Our text says, "God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do." In other words, the law and our fulfillment of it could not save us – ever. It wasn't the fault of God's Law which is good and holy. It is the fault of sinful human beings. So God did it for us. How did He do it? Our text goes on, "By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin he condemned sin in the flesh so that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us."

God sent a substitute. And it wasn't just any old substitute. It was His own Son, Jesus Christ. And He did not come in power and might, but in weakness and humility. He came as one of us – in the likeness of sinful flesh, but without the sin. Those of you who have sons (and I have three of them) would never ever want our sons to suffer; would never ever allow our sons to suffer; would never ever cause our sons to suffer. Yet God loved us so much that He was willing to condemn sin in the flesh of His only Son. He pronounced His Son guilty of all sin of all people of all time. And He carried out the sentence of physical and spiritual death on the cross. As our closing hymn for today says, "What wondrous love is this, o my soul, o my soul. What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul."

In doing this – sending His only Son – God not only condemned and punished our sin by His Son's suffering and death on our behalf, but the righteous requirements of the law have been perfectly and completely fulfilled in us by Jesus' complete obedience to the law on our behalf, as well. Jesus' resurrection from the dead shows this to be true. The resurrection is God's stamp of approval on all that Jesus has done on our behalf.

The benefits of Jesus' work in the past are not shrouded in the unknown and distant future. They come to us faster than a tweet and more instantaneous than any instant message. As Paul

says, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Notice that it doesn’t say there will be no condemnation somewhere in the future. It doesn’t say there’s a good chance that there will be no condemnation on judgment day. It says, “There is therefore NOW no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

For those who are in Christ Jesus – that is, joined to Him – there is no condemnation, no judgment against them. That describes you and me. For we were all baptized into Christ Jesus. Through the water of baptism and the power of God’s Word, you and I were joined to Christ Jesus. The salvation of God and the benefits of His salvation belong to us right now.

Paul says, “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” Understand what that means. You are free NOW. You are free from sin’s guilt and punishment NOW. There is forgiveness for all your sins NOW. You are free from the curse of death NOW. You have eternal life NOW. There is NOW no condemnation for you.

Do not fear death. Do not put your hope in technology, wealth, and material things. Do not put your faith in your own efforts. These are the things which you are pressured by the world and our culture to do. That’s living according to the flesh and putting your minds on the things of the flesh. That always results in death.

As Paul says, “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.” The Spirit of God has taken up residence in you at your baptism. Because of that, we have the most wonderful promise – not just for the far away future, but for right now. Paul says, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” You have a new life – right now. It is a life which rejoices in God’s past actions in Jesus Christ. It is a life lived in praise to God and service to our neighbor. It is a grand and glorious life that will never end.

If you love fast technology, then the Gospel and all of its blessings are just for you. While we may have fast technology, we have an even faster salvation. Salvation in Christ Jesus has been

completely done in the past – before we were born. The blessings of salvation are immediately ours through our baptisms. They are ours now because there is now no condemnation for us who are in Christ Jesus. Amen.