

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
1 September, Anno Domini 2019
Ephesians 2:1-10
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In the Name of the Father and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

These words from St. Paul are extremely important to know if we are to have a right and true faith. Here the apostle teaches very clearly about conversion, about our condition before conversion, and how that condition is changed. And when we simply let Paul speak, when we receive the Word of God which He preaches without trying to explain it away, it is quite clear and quite simple how an individual is saved. More than that, a right understanding of conversion is a fountain of comfort and life for all who believe.

Paul begins by making sure that we know our condition before conversion. We have to be careful not to confuse this with the condition of man in paradise before the fall into sin or the condition of the one who has been converted. This is absolutely crucial. Any failure to distinguish properly between the three or to try to soften Paul's words about fallen man has devastating effects on all the other articles of faith.

In paradise, man's will was perfect. Adam and Eve had perfect knowledge of God. Their will was free. They knew their Creator's command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and they had the ability to either obey or disobey. This is how God made them - with the freedom to reject him. Without this freedom, man couldn't actually love God. Love is not found at the end of coercion. Coercion produces fear.

And you know how that story went. Our first parents, when presented with a word contrary to God's, used their freedom to rebel against God and reach out for what wasn't given to them. That changed things. It changed man. The question is how? And how you answer that question determines all the rest of your doctrine, all the rest of your understanding of salvation.

Led by the Holy Spirit, the apostle answers the question quite unequivocally. He says "you were dead in your trespasses and your sins...". Dead is dead. Not wounded. Not dinged up a bit. Dead. When you're dead you can do absolutely nothing. You can't make a start of anything. You can't make any choices. You can't try. You're dead. The only way anything about you changes is if some

outside force acts upon you. This is exactly what God told Adam would happen - “in the day that you eat of it you will surely die.” And they did. They cut themselves off from God. And when you are cut off from God, you are cut off from life. You are dead. There isn’t a little spark of life still burning in you. God is the source of life. No God. No life. Period. The apostles says “[we] were by nature children of wrath.” The active rebellion against God so corrupted our nature that our wills were taken captive to sin. Freedom was lost. After the fall, before conversion, all men are now in slavery “following the prince of the power of the air...liv[ing] in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind.” Our nature can’t do, won’t do, anything else but sin. It hates God. It hates His will and strives against it with every fiber of its being. All our will wants is sin. There is absolutely no part of our will, according to the apostle, that wants even the tiniest shred of good.

But this is not what all teach. And it is so important that we recognize those who teach falsely about this because the consequences for the conscience are devastating. Salvation is very different depending on what happened to us because of the fall. The pope teaches that though the image of God in man suffered damage at the fall, not all was lost. He falsely leads others to believe that a spark of good remains within our nature and that spark is able and required, on its own, apart from the Holy Spirit, to at least begin to love God rightly and to keep the commandments, to not be like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, tax collectors. In this scenario, you are responsible for making a start of your salvation, doing as much as is in you in order to move God to reach down and help you to finish your salvation.

Our confessions sometimes call this semi-Pelagianism after the heretic Pelagius who taught that man’s nature wasn’t corrupted and we are completely able by our own powers to love God and our neighbor according to the Law. Rome’s teaching is really just full-on Pelagianism in disguise. If even a part of your salvation depends upon you, even if it is 0.1%, then you have no hope of salvation. What certainty do you have that you have accomplished that 0.1%? Can anyone honestly say that they have done everything they can to obey the commands of God with their whole heart? That 0.1% may as well be 100% because, according to this false teaching, Christ didn’t do enough and now it’s up to you.

Some Reformed churches will go even a step further and just embrace full Pelagianism like an old friend. They will put the words “Free Will” in the names of their churches. And even if they don’t put it in their name, the theology remains the same. It is, so they teach, completely within the power of sinners to choose to

believe in God, to give their life to him, to make Him their Lord and Savior without any working of the Holy Spirit. What they are saying is that sinful man can keep the first commandment. Of course, Jesus did die, but that doesn't matter a hill of beans until you do Him the great honor of accepting Him, giving Him your heart (that O so beautiful and pristine prize) and then using all your innate power and goodness to serve God and show Him what a good Christian you are (and desperately try to convince yourself). Thus they prevent little children from being received by Jesus in Holy Baptism because a) they are supposedly not yet really sinners because they haven't yet developed a sinful will and b) because they are not old enough and wise enough to choose to follow Jesus. These poor little ones are left either to an ambiguous grace of God which is never spoken of or promised in Scripture or they somehow ride into heaven on the strength of their parents' faith and good intentions.

The problem is that these kinds of false doctrine are exactly what the sinful flesh wants to hear. It wants to hear about how good it can be and how capable it is. It is why such teaching is so popular. It robs God of His glory and gives it to man. It leads people to believe that they can actually keep the fear, love, and trust in God above all things. And this, in turn, either leads to the hypocrisy of the Pharisee or the despair of Judas. These teachings are blasphemous and aren't to be tolerated by God's children for even a moment. God Himself will not tolerate those who teach or those who believe such things, who trust in themselves that they are righteous, because such teaching and faith rob people of the true salvation which our Lord Jesus Christ shed His precious Blood to win for us. These teachings create proud Pharisees rather than penitent tax collectors

The words of St. Paul in Ephesians thunder against both versions of this false doctrine. "You were dead." Dead people don't make a beginning or end of anything. They don't make decisions to accept or reject things. They're dead. And they are stuck in that death as the Word of God declares. If the dead are to live again, someone else must make them alive.

And that is the good news! That is the true and only Gospel! Let these words of St. Paul ring in your ears and settle deep within your heart - "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved - and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." God saved you when you were in the midst of death. Start to finish. He begins your salvation. He carries it along. He brings it to completion on the Last Day. God made you alive! You who were once dead, you who once walked

according to the flesh with its desires, you who have traveled through the baptismal waters - you have been made alive. You didn't ask. You didn't earn. God did all the things because He is merciful. You were God's enemy and God made you His child. You were dead, separated from God, drowning in sin, serving the will of the devil, fighting God tooth and nail (as vain and foolish as that is). But now, by grace, you have been saved. God has set you free. God has opened your grave. God has spoken, declaring you 100% forgiven because of Jesus' death for you. Jesus is alive and His life is now yours. He is risen. So are you. He, Son of Mary, is now seated in the heavenly places. In Him, so are you and you will one day join Him there along with the multitude of other sinners whose trust is only in Christ Jesus - not in the good they tried to do, not in the good they started to do. Only the good that Jesus did.

This is conversion. The dead being made alive by God. Conversion is completely the work of God. He causes the good news of Jesus to be proclaimed to you. He brings you to repentance, to see your sin and be terrified by it, to cry out "Lord, have mercy on me, make atonement for me, a sinner". He raises you up out of eternal death by baptizing you into the atoning death of Jesus. When Jesus rose from the dead and left the tomb still bearing your flesh, you went with Him, victorious. And now, as He sits at the right hand of God in the heavenly places you are with Him. He is your life. All the glory of your salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb. None of this is of your own doing because you couldn't do it, not even the smallest bit of it. But that is what makes it so certain. The one who trusts only in Christ can say with all boldness and confidence "I am saved because God saved me." The baptized can say "My sins are forgiven because God forgives me."

Your salvation is entirely the work and free gift of God. There is nothing for you to boast in of yourself. You have done no work deserving of eternal life nor have you completed your salvation by your better life. You are the workmanship of God who is abundantly rich in mercy and desires your salvation. Then, once you have been converted, a process which happens anew each day, each time you repent and receive the forgiveness of your sins, each time you draw on the promise of Holy Baptism, then the Holy Spirit begins to turn and reshape your will to desire the things of God. He causes you to begin to delight in keeping the Commandments, though it will remain a constant battle until our sinful flesh is purified in the resurrection. Having received the gift of the Holy Spirit, you begin to see that the desires of your flesh are evil and harmful and you begin to walk in the way of love for God and your neighbor. But again, this is only after you have

been converted. It is not a cause of your salvation or even the completing of your salvation. It is the fruit of your salvation.

God grant to each of you the joy and comfort of knowing that it is God who has made you alive, who has made you His child, who has made you a Christian. May He graciously keep us from falling into the trap of imagining that we are saved by our doing and boasting in our own works. Instead, may our mouths be filled with His praises who has given to us poor dead sinners the gift of forgiveness and eternal life.

In the Name of +Jesus.