

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

“When Good Is Not Good Enough”

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

“If you were to die tonight, would you go to heaven?” “And if you did die tonight, and you found yourself standing before the judgment seat of God and He said, ‘Why should I let you into heaven?’ what would you say?”

Those two questions were a part of an evangelism approach written some years ago by Dr. James Kennedy called “Evangelism Explosion” and even were adapted by our LC-MS under the title of “Dialogue Evangelism” and, as such, have been asked of thousands of people around the world. And while we might argue the appropriateness of such questions, one can’t argue that they are thought-provoking. Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are almost always the same: “I’m not sure if I’m going to heaven, I sure hope so. But I don’t know.” And “I really don’t know what I’d say but I’d probably say something like, ‘Well, I’ve been a pretty good person. I’ve done the best I could. Is that good enough?’”

Let me ask you, when is good “good enough”? I’m reminded of the fictional story of a man who died and suddenly found himself standing before the gates of heaven. As he walked forward, St. Peter welcomed him. “It’s nice to have you here,” St. Peter said. “But before you come in, I must inform you that we work on a point system here. Ten thousand points and you may enter. You earn points by the good things you have done.” “Well,” said the man, “let’s see. I never killed anyone and I never stole anything, at least nothing of any consequence. I’ve tried to live according to the Golden Rule – you know, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. And, oh yes, I attended church every chance I got although I have to admit I didn’t get too many chances. It’s just that I was busy most of the time, you know.” “Hmmm,” said St. Peter, “that’s one point.” “One point,” said the man, “one point! If that’s only one point how can anyone hope to be good enough? How can anyone hope to get into heaven?”

And, you know, that’s a good question! How can anyone know for sure that they’re going to heaven and, perhaps more importantly, how can anyone hope to be good enough to get in?

The Bible tells us that God created man in His own image, that is, perfect, holy, good – good enough for God – but when mankind fell into sin that was no longer true. The image was lost and man was no longer good enough. And every human being that has been born since that fall has been born a sinner. Each and every one of us here today has not only been born a sinner, we’ve proven it by sinning just like Adam. Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” And again, “They are all gone out of the way (that is, “God’s way”), they are together become unprofitable, there is none that does good, no, not one.” Now that’s a painful thing to admit. We all like to

think of ourselves as being good people, at least in general. But upon honest self-examination, which is what we are called to do this Lenten season, not one of us could honestly say anything but that we are indeed a sinner – that we have sinned in what we have done and what we have left undone. And as such, we cannot save ourselves. As hard as we may try, as good as we may try to be, according to God’s standard – that is, His Law – each and every one of us has been tried and found wanting. According to the Law, none of us is “good enough.”

Well, maybe God will kinda just overlook our sin – especially when we’re compared with others – you know, the ones who are really sinners. Not at all! God is a just God and because He is He must punish sin – all sin. Remember the verse, “The wages of sin is death”? In other words, for all the hate and envy and greed and lust and lying and cheating and stealing and gossiping and cursing and swearing and all the rest, we have earned our rightful wages. And we are paid in full – paid by death.

You see, having been created good enough by God, none of us is good enough any more. None of us can hope to get to heaven on our own. But thanks be to God, there’s more to the story than that. For God is a merciful God. He doesn’t want to punish us, for we are His creation and He loves us. The dilemma of God’s justice and His mercy – namely, that He must punish sin but He doesn’t want to punish us – was solved in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, both true God and true Man, did for us what none of us can do for ourselves. He kept the Law for us and then paid for our sins with his very life and in so doing he purchased a place for us in heaven which he offers to all as a gift. Ephesians 2 says it best when it says, “For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is a gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.” You see, heaven is a gift, offered freely and by the grace of God in Christ and received by faith.

And this faith, worked in the hearts and lives of people like you and me through Word and Sacrament, is more than just knowing the facts and the stories, it’s more than just turning to God for help when the going gets tough, it’s a trust – a complete trust in Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior. It’s putting our very lives in his hands, the good times as well as the bad and it’s devoting one’s life to living for Christ who lived and died and lives again for us.

Abraham had that kind of faith. In our text for today, Paul goes to great lengths to explain the place of faith in the life of a Christian. You see, some of the Christians at Rome, who had been Jewish, were mixed up as to the relationship of faith to the works of the law. In other words, some still felt that they had to be “good enough” for God to accept them as His in Christ. Paul said, “Is this blessing (that is, the blessing of forgiveness, life and salvation) given only to those who have faith in Christ but also keep the Jewish laws or is the blessing also given to those who do not keep the Jewish rules but only trust in Christ?” The answer, Paul asserts, lies in the fact that Abraham was given this blessing from God even before he became a Jew. Thus it is by faith alone that we are saved.

In the same way, blessing upon blessing, indeed everlasting life comes to those who trust solely in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself said in John 6, “Verily, verily, I say to you, he that believes in me has everlasting life.” It’s through his atoning sacrifice on the cross of Calvary that we have been made “good enough” for God. It’s because of him we no longer stand condemned by the law for our sin but now are free – free to love God with all our heart, soul and mind – free to love our neighbor as ourselves – free to worship, free to study His Word, free to fellowship with Him and our brothers and sisters in the faith, free to share the Good News of salvation with others. You see, Christians do what they do not out of fear of punishment nor out of hope of reward. Christians do what they do because they’re free.

May God bless us, justified by grace through faith, and in Christ made “good enough.”
In Jesus’ name. Amen.