



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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First Sunday after the Epiphany

January 13, 2019

“Fix Me Lord, But Not Yet.”

(Matthew 2:1-5)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?”

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River You proclaimed Him Your beloved Son and anointed Him with the Holy spirit. Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as Your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Author Philip Yancey talks about a conversation he had one evening with a friend named Daniel. They had just finished dinner and during dessert Daniel dropped the bombshell. After fifteen years of marriage, he had decided to leave his wife for another woman. The marriage had no insurmountable issues. There was no abuse, no unfaithfulness. They didn't even quarrel much. He simply wanted a change, sort of like when you get the itch for a new car.

Daniel knew what he was about to do was wrong, and he knew his decision would inflict damage on his wife and young children. Even so, he was determined. So he asked the question, "Do you think God can forgive me for something as awful as I am about to do?" (*What's So Amazing About Grace* pp. 177ff).

How would you answer that question? Your good friend Daniel has just told you he's about to leave his wife and children for really no good reason and has asked you, "Do you think God can forgive me for what I am about to do?" The question is slithering on the table like a rattlesnake. What are you going to do with it?

Suppose you say, "No. No he will not forgive you." That answer assumes there is no forgiveness for people who willingly, deliberately sin; no forgiveness for people who know that what they are about to do is wrong, but do it anyway. Are you comfortable with that? We all sin, and much of the time we know full well when we are about to sin. God has written the Law on our hearts (Rom. 2:15), so our conscience starts accusing us even before we follow through with our plans.

You're late for an appointment only because you lost

track of the time watching youtube clips, but you decide to fudge a little and say you got caught up in traffic, which is never very convincing in Watertown but that's your story. Or suppose some of your income was paid in cash and you know the IRS would have a dickens of a time tracking that down, so you decide not to declare it as taxable income. It's all wrong, and you know it's wrong, but you do it anyway. All of us forge ahead in sinfulness, fully aware God forbids it. I don't know about you, but I'm counting on God's forgiveness also for deliberate sin.

What are the consequences, then, if you answer Daniel's question the other way? What are the consequences if you tell him, "Yes, God will forgive you"? Have you just given him license for immorality? Have you just given him the permission he's seeking, the blessing he wants from you on his plan?

This is not unlike the issue Paul is addressing in our Epistle lesson. Paul was confronting a very human reaction to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Since salvation comes by grace, not by works, some were thinking maybe it doesn't matter how we live. Since God is forgiving and gracious, we can pretty much do we want, right?

Indeed, sometimes . . . in fact often times, the Gospel of Jesus Christ could easily be misunderstood as permissive, without consequence before God. I'm thinking of the parable of the prodigal son who demands his inheritance even before his father has died. He then squanders it on wine, women and song, and when he's out of money (and options), runs home with his tail tucked between his legs. What does the father do? He actually showers him with gifts, and throws a big old party to celebrate the boy's return. Can you imagine? This little brat receives such a lavish welcome home. The older brother in the parable, (the obedient one who stayed home and worked hard), he doesn't like it at all. "Dad, are you just going to let him get away that? Are there no consequences?" If you think about it, the older brother was scandalized by grace. He feels the father is being way too forgiving and generous and loving.

Remember the parable of the workers in the vineyard, where the last ones hired, (who worked just a couple of hours) are paid the same amount as those who were out in the field all day long, doing the bulk of the work. Those all day laborers were scandalized by the owner's generosity. "It's not fair!" they say. "They worked for a couple of hours and yet you gave them a full day's wages. We were out there all day, in the heat of the sun, doing the majority of the work, and yet you pay us the same as them?" Their argument, of course, is with grace. There should be consequences, they think, positive and negative consequences depending on what you've done.

When the Pharisees and Scribes noticed Jesus befriending sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes, they didn't understand it or like it. It eroded their sense of right and wrong and of natural order and of consequences. We can understand that. You mean to say he's going to be all lovey-dovey with those scoundrels and rascals but stick it to upright and hardworking and respectable? Grace always has about it that scent of scandal.

The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrote, "Wherever the true Gospel is preached, fools are sure to ask this question" [whether the Gospel gives license for sin]. He goes on to say, "Wherever they do not ask this question, there is room to suspect something very different from the Gospel has been preached" (Barth, *Romans* pp. 67-68). To proclaim the forgiveness of sins and salvation by grace is to skate on thin ice, to the very edge of danger. Someone once asked Barth what he would say to Adolf Hitler if given the opportunity. Barth replied, "Jesus Christ died for your sins." That's skating close to open water, isn't it? The Gospel of Jesus Christ will always attract to itself that sense of moral outrage.

Two giants of the Old Testament, Moses and David, committed murder and God still loved them. To save his own hide Abraham passed his wife Sarah off to Pharaoh as his sister . . . and God still loved him. Hagar, the wife of the prophet Hosea, decked herself with jewelry, perfume, high

heels and a short skirt. Then she went out and gave herself over to former lovers. Hosea was crushed, furious, but what does God tell Hosea? “Take her back as your wife and love her even as I the Lord Your God love my people Israel.” “But where are the consequences?” we ask?

The consequences are on Jesus. He bears the sin. He suffers the worst of the consequences. Yes, the world is ordered in such a way that there are usually other consequences. Sin causes pain for yourself and others. You might be ticketed for speeding; you might be audited for cheating. However, they’re not going to flog you and nail you to a cross. People like to say, “They crucified me.” No they didn’t. Don’t say that; it belittles what Jesus did for you and makes you out to be the big victim which you’re not. On the cross, Jesus **alone** bore the consequences of sin for you.

So, back to Daniel’s question: “Shall we ignore God’s will and deliberately sin knowing he will forgive?” Paul poses it this way. “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” He answers in the strongest terms, “By no means!” In the Greek, it’s stronger still but I’d have to cuss to get it right. Then follows some of the most difficult but important verses in all Scripture about Holy Baptism. Honestly, it’s tough sledding, but hugely important.

Paul asks, “How can we who have died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” What this means is that when you were baptized, you were connected to Jesus so thoroughly, so completely, that we can seriously say in the death and burial of Jesus **you** died at Golgotha, and **you** were buried in that garden, in the borrowed tomb of Joseph of Arimathaea. Let me say that again: When you were baptized, you were so thoroughly connected to Jesus that in a very real way, **you** died at Golgotha, and **you** were buried in that garden.

Paul circles around it and restates it verse 6: “We know that our old self was crucified with Jesus.” The old, natural man in you, the Old Adam, that hostile enemy of God in you, was crucified in and with the crucifixion of Jesus at

Golgotha. You can put a pin in his toe and he won't flinch. This means we can no longer be servants of sin because that man who would be a servant of sin is no longer alive; he's been crucified. Now this is where it gets slippery. The Old Adam keeps wanting to raise his ugly head, and it's our job to put him down through daily contrition and repentance.

Paul circles around it again. "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." What this means is that in Baptism, God gives us the benefits of Christ's death *and* the benefits of Christ's resurrection. In Baptism we are united in Christ's death and burial so that we will be united to His resurrection and eternal life.

This is why we talk so much about baptism. What a gift! Whatever it was that Christ did for us on the cross he gives it to us in Baptism. Whatever it was that Christ did for us in his resurrection he gives it to us in Baptism. It's the promise that we will rise from the dead, just as Christ rose from the dead. This makes baptism a medicine like none other.

In the Large Catechism Luther wrote, "Imagine there was a doctor somewhere who understood the art of saving people from death or, even though they died, could restore them quickly to life so that they would live forever. Oh, how the world would pour on him money like snow . . . No one could find access to him because of the crowds of the rich! But here in Baptism there is freely brought to everyone's door such a treasure and medicine that it utterly destroys death and preserves all people alive" (LC IV 43).

Having been so extraordinarily blessed by God, we lose interest in rebelling against him. Luther writes, "Grace makes the Law dear to us." "Grace makes **the Law** dear to us" (AE 35:375-76). Joseph, whom God rescued again and again in Egypt, told Potipher's wife who was seducing him, "How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" Or as Paul told Titus, (2:12) "the *grace* of God teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live

self-controlled, upright and godly lives.” Not just the Law but the grace of God also teaches us to live upright, godly lives.

Living in gratitude for his grace, we don’t want to see what we can get away with. We want to learn how we can serve him. Connected to Christ through baptism, we also want to be careful about our witness to others. 1 Pet. 2:12, “Live such good lives among the unbelievers that. . . they may see your good deeds and glorify God.”

Can God forgive me for what I’m about to do? It’s a fool’s question. Belonging to Jesus through baptism, we do not use forgiveness as a license for sin. That would be an abuse of grace. That would be trying to revive the Old Man in us. Grace offers no grounds for immorality. If anything, grace makes the Law dear to us and inspires us to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives. Amen.

