

PRIDE, REPENTANCE AND GRACE

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST PROBLEM WE HAVE IN OUR COUNTRY? I suppose it depends on who you ask. Some people would say drugs. Some would say the breakup of the family unit. Others might say poverty or injustice. Some would say too much government; others would say too little government. But none of these is our biggest problem. They're all just symptoms of our biggest problem, which is the same one we've always had. Our biggest problem—and one which you will never hear about from any politician or public official anymore—is sin.

Sin cripples our spirits, it clouds our intellects, it corrupts our emotions and it destroys our bodies. Sin wrecks families, betrays trust, debases honor and produces immeasurable suffering. If it is allowed to go unchecked, it ultimately kills us and separates us from God eternally.

We know this—and yet we sin. Not only do we sin, we invite others to join us in our sin because it makes us feel better to have some company while we're destroying ourselves. We handle the guilt we feel over our sins either by convincing ourselves that they're really not all that bad or by learning to ignore the guilt itself. And, of course, we are encouraged by the world, the flesh and the devil, who wink at us and say, *"You only go around once in this life—might as well enjoy yourself while you do."* We can even convince ourselves that we're actually *entitled* to our sins—like the country western song that goes, *"How can it be bad when it feels so good?"* It's no wonder that God said that *"Every inclination of the thoughts of man's heart is only evil—all the time."* [Gen. 6:5]

Sometimes Missouri Synod pastors are accused of overemphasizing sin. *"You guys preach too much law, and not enough Gospel. Look at the wording of your confession of sins: 'I, a poor, miserable sinner...' and so forth. No wonder you're called the misery synod!"*

Well, all it takes is an honest look at human history to conclude that sin runs rampant in humanity. And for those who think that mankind has made progress in this area, it is a sobering fact that more people perished in war and genocide in the 20th Century than in all previous centuries combined. Doesn't exactly sound like progress, does it? The price of sin is death, as God said to Adam: *"On the day you eat of it you will surely die,"* and Paul wrote to the Church at Rome: *"The wages of sin is death."* When a pastor fails to warn his congregation about the power and the deadly consequences of sin, he is like a doctor who fails to tell a patient with cancer that he is sick. The patient might feel better in the short term, but in the long term he will die without even knowing what killed him. Until we understand the power of sin in OUR lives we will remain its victims. If we don't KNOW our enemy, we can't possibly hope to defeat it.

Some of the most powerful preaching that has ever been done on the subject of sin and its consequences was done by John the Baptizer. John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What is a "baptism of repentance?" Well, to begin with, it's a different baptism than the one we're familiar with. When Paul arrived in the city of Ephesus, some disciples there told him that they had been baptized with "John's baptism." Paul told them, *"John's baptism was a baptism of repentance,"* and then he baptized them in the name of the Lord Jesus. And so a baptism of repentance was

different from being baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The first is a public profession; the second is a sacrament.

Actually, baptism was common among the Jews even before John began offering his baptism. New converts to Judaism were baptized as a rite of initiation into the covenant community of Israel. It signified that the convert was passing from one status to another: from gentile to Jew, from unwashed to clean, from alien to a child of God. John was using this ritual to demonstrate to the Jews that what God required of his children was not just a change of behavior, but a change of heart. That they be inwardly cleansed, not just outwardly washed. That their hearts had to be circumcised—not merely their flesh. And this change had to begin with repentance—a feeling of remorse over one’s sins accompanied by the desire to turn away from them. Those who chose to receive John’s baptism were making a public profession of repentance: that they were sinners who wanted to stop sinning.

Of course this meant that a person had to be able to humble himself. To make public profession of one’s sinfulness is humiliating. That’s why the Pharisees and Sadducees who came down from Jerusalem to see what John was doing were outraged by his suggestion that they needed to undergo a baptism of repentance like everybody else. They were the religious leaders of Israel and proud to be so. And humiliation—especially public humiliation—is the mortal enemy of pride. The two simply cannot exist in the same person at the same time.

Pride was the problem—and not only for the Pharisees and Sadducees. It’s the biggest obstacle to spiritual health that you and I have as well. Pride paralyzes us with the fear that if other people knew about our sins they would despise us, and so the best thing we can do is to hide them. Pride persuades us that sin isn’t all that important—that God is only slightly irritated by our sins rather than enraged by them. Pride convinces us that OUR way is superior to God’s way—especially when God’s way gets in OUR way. Pride argues that there is no need to repent just yet—we can repent later after we’ve enjoyed our sins. In other words, pride convinces us that God can be mocked. We give in to our pride when we tell ourselves that we can have forgiveness and grace without humbling ourselves before God—in other words, pride convinces us *that there is a detour around the cross*.

Well, if you think that, my friends, I’ve got sobering news for you: there is no detour around the cross. Elijah must come before Messiah; repentance must always precede forgiveness.

The anguish and the contrition which the Holy Spirit produces in us when we honestly confront our sins is the healthiest thing that can happen to us because it is the only thing that will drive us to the one place where we can leave our sins behind, and that is at the cross of Jesus Christ. It’s not that God wants to see us grovel: it’s that God can only impart mercy to a heart that will receive it. And a heart that is full of pride has no room left for mercy. That’s what Isaiah—and John the Baptizer—meant when they said that repentance makes straight a pathway for the Lord. What we need to learn, ***over and over again***, is that it is only when we humble ourselves and come to understand our own weakness that we can begin to stand in the strength of the Lord. As Paul wrote, “I delight in weakness...for when I am weak, then am I strong.”

Do you have the courage to be weak? To cast aside pride and stand naked and ashamed before God? It’s hard, isn’t it? I mean, you’re looking at a guy who wears suspenders and

a belt and keeps one hand in his pocket—just to be sure his pants don't fall down. Nobody's gonna see ME as I really am—not even God. Instead of wearing the armour of faith—I prefer a more fashionable wardrobe that keeps me “loogin good.” God tries to help me overcome my pride by showing me in the mirror every morning that things are going south. But that just makes me work all the harder to maintain the illusion that they're not—even if it's only for my own sake.

Our problem is that we think of the cross as a *destination* rather than a *doorway*. We don't END UP on the cross; we enter God's Kingdom THROUGH the cross. “*Any man who would come after me must take up his cross daily and follow me.*” It goes against every instinct we have, every molecule of our trust in what this world has to offer. But it is the way, the truth and the life, and there is no way or truth or life apart from it.

We all need John's baptism—not necessarily in the Jordan River, but in the water of our own tears.

Will you pray with me?

Holy Spirit of God, You guide us and help us whether we walk in green pastures, beside still waters, or through the valley of the shadow of death. You see how inwardly our disordered lives need your guidance, and our unclean hearts, your cleansing. We come into your presence with secrets in our hearts that shame us—hidden rooms in our souls from the thought of which we shrink and yet to which we return with fascination again and again. Destroy our pride, Holy Spirit, and cleanse our hearts with repentance so that they may be filled with Your grace and mercy and peace. Amen.

Matthew 3:1-12 John the Baptist Prepares the Way

³ In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’”

⁴ Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”