

June 12, 2016 - Pentecost 4

Two Kinds of People

Galatians 2:15–21; 3:10–14



Dear Friends in Christ,

There is the story of a rich man who came to Guatemala and visited one of our beautiful lakes down there, Lake Atitlan. He was disturbed to find a fisherman sitting lazily beside his hand carved boat. "Why aren't you out there fishing?" he asked.

"Because I've caught enough fish for today," said the fisherman. "Why don't you catch more fish than you need?" The rich man asked.

"What would I do with them?" the fisherman replied. "You could earn more money," came the impatient reply. "Then you could buy a better boat so you could go deeper and catch more fish. You could purchase nylon nets, catch even more fish and make more money. Soon you'd have a fleet of boats and be rich like me."

The fisherman looked at the guy and asked, "Then what would I do?" The rich man said, "You could sit down and enjoy life." "What do you think I'm doing now?" Replied the fisherman.

Sometimes you hear that "there are only two kinds of people in this world" now what you don't usually hear is the ending, for example: It is said that there are only two kinds of people in the world. Those who work hard and those enjoy life.

"There are only two kinds of people in this world: those you want to have a drink with . . . and those who make you want to drink." Now those examples are probably just jokes.

But there is one that is no joke at all. There are two kinds whose who say to God: "Your will be done", and those to whom at the end God will say, "your will be done". That is those who will be in heaven and those who would not by their own choice.

Others are short philosophical views: "There are only two kinds of people in this world: thinkers and doers." "There are only two kinds of people in this world: those who work hard, and those who let them work hard."

I. There are two kinds of people.

Similarly the Apostle Paul says that there are two kinds of people, Jews and Gentile sinners.

Now, this type of division seems all too natural for each one of us. Humans have the tendency to look at people and decide who "is my kind of person and who isn't, who measures up and who doesn't."

But there's also something more to it if you think biblically. Paul had come by this perspective honestly. In the Old Testament, there's Israel and the nations—one or the other. And that "two kinds" thinking is not just Old Testament. Think of Jesus' word about Judgment Day. There are the sheep and the goats. In the book of Revelation, there are those gathered round the throne and those outside eternal joy.

Yes, there's something to the "two types of people" thing. But in the reading from Galatians 2 and 3, St. Paul wants us to see something more, even though he started with his division of two kinds of people: Jews and Gentile sinners.

Paul was born a Jew, a proud Jew with a heritage that went back all the way to Abraham. He was proud of his roots because they were intimately connected with his religion, with God. Judaism was a religion established in the principle of human obedience to God's laws, given at Sinai. But as they were established in the divinely given set of moral standards, the Jews realized that there was a division, the division that existed between them and the rest of the world, the Gentiles. And because the Gentiles were either ignorant of God's laws or rejected them, they were sinners, but the Jews who lived out the laws—they thought of themselves as righteous. An easy distinction: a moral minority versus an immoral majority.

But now hear this: "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified" (2:15–16).

There is a shift in Paul's perspective. But there are still two kinds of people, although not Jews and Gentile sinners, it is of those who are justified by faith and those trying to justify themselves. Those that say to God "your will be done" and those who at the end God would say "your will be done."

II. But there is just one kind of fallen humanity.

But until then, here and now there is one basic, elemental reality. There is only one kind of people: transgressors, sinners, people under a sentence of condemnation. It is as old as Adam and his fall. And as we remain on this side of eternity we all fit this profile before God.

Now, this was not a great philosophical insight that Paul had or developed. It was the result of an experience . . . an encounter with the living Lord Jesus. Paul's easy distinction between Jews and Gentile sinners falls flat in Jesus present. Christ Jesus blows our standards out of the water. We can all find people in life who have so screwed up their lives that it makes us look good by comparison and yes it does make us feel good. But our feeling good becomes the bases for all our self-justification, we think we are better than other. We set a standard that enables us to explain how good we are by comparison.

But that doesn't work when you meet Jesus, who isn't merely "moral," but utterly holy—the man who is beyond anything humanity had ever seen. Sinless. Pure. Totally different from us even though he is fully human, just like us. Yes, perfect. What humanity was before the fall, perfect.

Who measures up to that? No one! All our supposed righteousness—even for those who understand good and bad, right and wrong—all of it is nothing in comparison. No one measures up to Christ, so Paul says it for us all: "by works of the law no one will be justified" (2:16).

If there are two kinds of people, then it actually works like this: there is Jesus Christ, the true man who is what man was meant to be, righteous and holy before God. And there's all the rest of us: sinners. And when Paul realized that, it hit him like a ton

of bricks. Proud Paul went from a person convinced of his righteousness to be the man who wrote to Timothy and called himself the foremost of sinners (1 Tim 1:15–16).

So we are all sinners. All of us. And now, in a strange and somewhat frightening way, those who are most into “morality” are in the most spiritual danger. In a way they are like Paul before he met Jesus, justifying themselves on the basis of their morality—on “works of the law.” They are the Pharisees who scorned Jesus and his compassion for the mass of people who had wrecked their lives with open sin. Today, they may be those who justify themselves because they are so tolerant. Or, “they” may be some of us: people who so abhor the moral chaos around us that we justify ourselves, counting ourselves as the exceptional ones who are pleasing God with our lives. Let’s be careful because that too is not acceptable to God. Yes, it ends in death—eternal death—because it refuses the only one who can justify us, Christ. Because, most often than not, we tell God that our will is done, not his, even when we try to know him, but on our own terms and likes, at the end he will tell us “your will be done” and that will not be good news.

III. And there is one Savior only.

But thanks be to God that Jesus is our only Savior, the one whose perfection in his obedience made him to offer himself for us, taking our place, even our punishment and death—in Scripture’s words: becoming a curse for us; the curse we deserve.

So it is that Paul points us to Christ and Christ alone and says that, in him, we have been crucified and, in him, we are now alive with his very life. Listen again what the apostle writes: (2:20): “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Should we be different people then? Yes, but not of our own, because Paul says: “It is no longer I who live.”

But when I say “I no longer live” I we also need to realize why I no longer live. And I no longer live because, either of who I’m, a dead person in my sins and trying to justify myself before God, or I no longer live, because it is Christ who lives in me. “It is no longer I who live. The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God.” Paul says.

And he say so, as one who has seen Christ’s perfection—and been made alive by him.

Now, have you seen Christ’s perfection? If your sins have been forgiven, you have seen Christ’s perfection. Yes we are still sinners, but in Christ there is another story, our story not of sin, but Jesus story who is also our story.

Luther explained it like this: “Though I am a sinner in myself, I am not a sinner in Christ.” And, again: “I am a sinner in and by myself apart from Christ. Apart from myself and in Christ I am not a sinner” (AE 12:311; AE 38:158).

“In myself,” I am a transgressor, a sinner, condemned, dead. Only “apart from myself” is there hope. Outside of myself, there is Christ and his promise.

The promise is forgiveness. The truth of the forgiveness of sins, not and advice, not direction on how to be a good person, or more righteous, or how you feel good about the things of God or, how you want to feel good. Not new rules for us to fix our lives either, rules are set by us, but in ourselves we are dead.

So what does it make us special people then? It’s forgiveness. Period! It is the promise spoken to us in Baptism, where we received the washing of rebirth (Titus 3:5),

where we were brought into Christ—baptized into Christ’s death and his new life (Rom 6:3–4). Our life is in Christ, in Christ and his life (Col 3:3). That’s what make us special people.

That is the promise repeated in absolution, where Christ speaks to his Body, the Church. That is the promise whenever Christ speaks his word over bread and wine at the altar, whereby he is in us and we are in him.

It is his promise, and it is sure. To have faith in him is to trust that promise and to rejoice that, holding fast to Christ, we will live the new life he has for us, day-by-day, here and now, and those promises we do hear, speak and sing in church every Sunday, through the liturgy, even with words that we don’t hear often in our everyday life, there, Jesus proclaims his forgiveness, which translates God’s love for us.

Two Kinds of People? Yes: Dead transgressors, those to whom God will say one day “your will be done” . . . and Christ, in whom dead sinners are forgiven and given a new life, and in Christ we say to God “your will be done”

Amen.