

Christians, sin is always a very tricky thing, because no matter how clearly you speak against it, no matter how much you try to cut it out, it always finds a way to wiggle through. It refuses to be contained. Because last week, if you remember, Paul was saying that no one can claim to be different from the world. We cannot claim to be any different in terms of judgment, because we all stand the same before the Lord. And yet the Jew still tries to wiggle out of this. He says, "What you're saying, Paul, is not quite true of me, because I am different from everybody else. In fact, my differences come from God himself. That's why what you say doesn't apply." "And the two things that I have from God," he says, "are the fact that I have the law and the fact that I am circumcised. These two things show that I am different." But this kind of pride, unfortunately, was leading him to turn the things of God into something else. It was leading him to twist the promises of God into something that God never intended them to be. And so Paul in our reading for tonight goes after these two points. He wants to make it perfectly clear that no one has room to boast. No one, not even the Jew, can claim to be righteous before the Lord.

And so, Paul then first goes after the Jews' claim to have the law. And in the first four verses of our reading for this evening, he gives a picture of the kind of pride that he was afflicted with. Paul understands this perfectly clearly. Paul, after all, used to be a Jew. He was "a Pharisee of Pharisees," to use his own words. He knows exactly where they're coming from, because he used to think this way himself. So he gets right to the heart of it. He goes right for the throat. "You who are called a Jew," he says, "who rely on the law." You could also translate that as, "you who take rest in the law. You who have your confidence there. You look for comfort in the law. You turn to it in the midst of all of your troubles, because that's where you think you're going to find rest and peace. That's what you rely on." "You who boast in God," he says, "you say that God is your God, that God is the God of the Jews and of no one else in all the rest of the world. And that's why you boast in him." "You who claim to know his will," he says, "you know what God wants. You know what he wants you to do, and you strive to do it at least in some sense. You who approve what is excellent, because you've been instructed out of the law. You know the Word. You know what's good. You know what God likes, and you know what he hates. And so you try to go after the good and avoid the evil." "And you claim to be so good at this, in fact," he says, "that you claim to be an instructor of the foolish, a guide to the blind, a teacher of children." "That you know the law so well," he says, "that you can teach others. You can tell them what God wants and lead even the Gentiles to become like you. That is your boast. That is what you claim to be. And you say that you are truly of God because you have the law."

But the problem here, Christians, was that the Jew thought that he was righteous because of it. He thought that because he had the law, because God had given it to him, that made him acceptable in the sight of God. Faith had nothing to do with it. The law was what was important. The law itself was his confidence. The law itself was what he boasted in. Not even God himself was his confidence. "But despite all of that," Paul says, "you don't even listen to the very law you claim to have. You don't even do the very things that God tells you to do." And in the next four verses of our reading, he tears them down for that very reason. "You who claim to teach others, do you not even teach yourself? You who preach against adultery, do you commit adultery? You who preach against stealing, do you steal?" They weren't even listening to the law. They were guilty of the very things that they were preaching against, guilty of the worst kind of hypocrisy.

And this wasn't anything unique to Paul, either. Jesus himself says in Matthew 15, speaking to the Pharisees: "God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gain for me is given to God," he need not honor his father. So for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the Word of God." But don't you see what they're doing, Christians? They're claiming to still be following God, to still be doing what he wants, even while they're breaking his law. Stealing from their own parents and then saying that it's perfectly fine because they gave it to God. The worst kind of hypocrisy, turning the promises that God had made into something else.

Jesus also says in Matthew 23: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!" So unfortunately, they were so focused on these little, tiny points of the law and thinking that that was the most important thing. They were so concerned about the mint and the dill and the cumin, how much they were supposed to give, when they were supposed to give it, all of those little, tiny details, and yet they were ignoring the whole purpose of the law in the first place: justice and mercy and love and righteousness. They had focused in on these things and thinking that that was what pleased God, even while they missed the whole point of the law.

And it's not even something that was happening just in Jesus's time, either. In fact, all the way back in the days of Malachi, four hundred years earlier, they were also struggling with this problem. Malachi himself said: "Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions." In other words, they were not only mistreating the law, they were twisting it around so that they didn't even have to keep it to its full extent. Always looking for exceptions, always looking for these loopholes in order to get out of what God said. And yet, at the same time still thinking that they were doing what God wanted them to do. This was the pride that they were struggling with, the pride that Paul was speaking against.

So is it any wonder, then, that the name of God was being blasphemed among the nations because of them? People would look at how they were acting and say, "If this is how God's people act, what kind of God is he? If this is how God's people act, I want nothing to do with God." And in that way, they brought God into disrepute.

Christians, do we struggle with this too? Maybe we say that we are Christians, that we have the name of Christians, that we know what God wants, that we follow after his Word. All of these things. But do we also make excuses for why our sins are okay or why they're not even sins at all? In this way too, Christians, we can lead the nations to blaspheme the name of God. People can look at us and see how we're acting, and if we're not acting in the way that God wants us to, then they're not going to want anything to do with us, the Church, or with God. And it's not like we can make excuses for this, either, and say, "Well, we're all sinners anyway." Because if we say one thing, Christians, and then do another, we shouldn't be surprised when even the world calls us out on it. We must not act in this way to bring God's name into disrepute.

But Paul also goes after the other thing that the Jews rely on, that is, their circumcision. Because God had made a promise to Abraham back in Genesis chapter 17. He says: "This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you." So this circumcision, then, was a sign of God's promise, the promise he made to Abraham and the promise that he made to all of his children after him. Circumcision set them apart. Circumcision was the surest proof that they actually belonged to God.

"But what good is circumcision," Paul says, "if you don't have faith to go along with it? What good is circumcision if you aren't going to listen to what God says? Physical circumcision will not save you if you refuse to listen to the Lord." And the prophets had also said this to Israel long ago. Jeremiah, for example, said "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord! Remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem." And Moses also said, Deuteronomy 10: "Circumcise, therefore, the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn." So physical circumcision all by itself was nothing. It would not save them. Because circumcision without faith is not keeping with what God intended it to be. But circumcision and faith brought together is what God intended, because that's what he wanted them to do. And in fact, Paul says if you had faith without circumcision, that would not condemn you, because faith was the one thing needed, faith in the promises, faith in God. Without that faith, no one was a Jew outwardly, no matter how much they claim to be. But with that faith, they were a Jew inwardly, even those who were not Jewish by birth. Because one is a member of Israel by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

And to close out his point here, Paul actually makes a little bit of a pun at the end of our reading. He says in verse 29: "His praise is not from man, but from God." This is a pun, because the word "Jew" comes from the name "Judah," and Judah in Hebrew means "praise." In fact, we hear in Genesis 29, when Leah gave birth to a son, she said: "'This time I will praise the Lord.' Therefore she called his name Judah." So Jew in this case means "praise." So what Paul is saying, then, is without faith, the outward Jew, the outward "praise," so to speak, only finds his praise in men. He's only interested in what other people say. His Jewishness comes from what other people think about him, his outward reputation, but it ends up being nothing before God. But the inward Jew, the inward "praise" finds his praise from God. The inward Jew finds his Jewishness from the Lord, the God-given faith in the promises that leads him to be truly righteous before God. That is where he finds his trust. That is what makes him pure in the eyes of God.

But Christians, are we also tempted to turn God's promises to something else? To take what God promised to do for us and to make it into an excuse for sin? To say things like: "God has promised to forgive me, so it doesn't matter if I do this." Or that "I can't help it if I do this, and God's going to forgive me anyway." That's turning the things of God into something else. We can do this with the sacraments too, unfortunately. To say things like, "I have been baptized into Christ, so God is always going to accept me even if I do this." Or going to the Lord's Supper and receiving the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and saying, "For that reason, I'm good, so I can go do whatever I want for the rest of the day." That's turning the things of God into something else. And there's many ways, unfortunately, to fall into this sin and to turn God's promises into an excuse for those sins.

But God made these promises to us for our good, Christians. And when we hold onto those promises by faith, then we will find sure comfort even in the midst of our trials and temptations. Jesus died and rose again to make us into something new, so that we would not continue in our sins, so that we would not use him as an excuse for our sins. But Jesus died and rose again, Christians, to set us free from sin forever. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we belong to God, and we don't belong to sin. Without God-given faith, we have nothing to stand on. But with that God-given faith, we can be confident that we are the Lord's. Without faith, we all stand condemned before God. But with faith, we stand justified in his sight. So Christians, let us turn to the Lord in true faith, calling on his name, knowing that we will find forgiveness in Jesus Christ our Lord. Let us turn to him, not using his promises as excuses, but holding onto them as what they are, promises that he has given to us for our faith.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, we thank you that you have given us all things through your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to trust in you and to follow after him, knowing that these promises are made for our good. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.