

The Lies of Lent – Lent 2019

"You Need to Earn God's Forgiveness"

Text: Matthew 27:3-5

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer. (Psalms 19:14)
Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians: you have all no doubt heard sins classified or grouped into categories like "mortal" or "venial," "deadly" and "non-deadly." We do not so classify sins in the conservative Lutheran Church, at least not officially. The danger in ranking or categorizing sins is twofold. On the one hand we will naturally and inevitably come to think of venial or non-deadly sins as relatively unimportant – as if the only sins with which we need to be concerned are the really big sins. For that reason we allow the so-called *smaller sins* to go unchecked in our lives. The other danger is that we could be led to despair of ever reaching heaven if we should fall into a mortal sin – as though Jesus' sacrificial payment for our sins on the cross was not sufficient to pay for the really big sins, only the little ones.

While the Lutheran Church does not categorize or rank sins, in our own minds individual members of the Church often do just that. We tend to regard "little sins" as easily forgivable by our God and expect his forgiveness to be automatic – with little or no thought or even repentance on our part. On the other hand, we err in exactly the opposite way when it comes to the big, nasty sins. We regard the big sins as those for which we *really* need to repent to be forgiven. If the sin is big enough, we might even slip into the mistaken notion that we have to be contrite for a good long time before we can be truly and completely forgiven.

It is wrong to imagine that some sins are worse than others *as to their damning consequences*. Every sin, no matter how small or insignificant we imagine it to be, is enough both to condemn us to hell and to necessitate a savior. The fall of mankind, remember, was brought about by what we today would consider a relatively minor sin. Eve ate a piece of fruit she wasn't supposed to. However, since Jesus has paid for all sins, unbelief is the only sin that damns. In other words, if you do not believe in Jesus, you will be condemned to hell for your *unbelief*, not for a specific mortal or venial sin. If you *do* believe in Jesus, in God's sight you are as perfect as was (and is) his own Son.

Sins, however, do vary in severity as to their consequences and as to their effects on others. Sin that is publicly known, for example, carries the

potential to weaken another's faith or to embolden another to sin. Only in this regard can it be argued that some sins are *worse* than others.

This leads us back to our theme we have been following during the past three Sunday: *The Lies of Lent*. Like sin, none of the Lies of Lent are good. All of these lies are sinful and possess the potential for great spiritual harm to those who believe them. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that any lie could be worse *as to its consequences* than the lie we expose this morning: "*You Need to Earn God's Forgiveness*." To buy into this lie is to join the ranks of the condemned unbelievers. Our text for this morning makes that fact abundantly clear. The text that exposes this worst of the *Lies of Lent* is found recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, the 27th Chapter:

^{ESV}(Matthew 27:3-5) Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, ⁴ saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." ⁵ And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself.

These are God's words. In perfect confidence that these are the words of God and not of man, and asking the God who gave us these words to bless us through their study, so we pray, "**Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth!**" Amen.

If you have ever seen sudden violent death up close then you know the unique horror and revulsion that such a thing brings to those who witness it. The immediate reaction, amidst the natural revulsion and loathing, is a powerful sense of pity for the one whose life has been unexpectedly and violently ended. This is a natural, human reaction, but it is an illogical and emotional response. Physically speaking, the individual whose life is suddenly and violently ended usually suffers very little. Those who are left behind suffer much more. The point here is that even the *violent* death of a child of God is a blessed event for the one who is called home. Pity for someone who rests blissfully in the arms of his or her Savior is misplaced, at best.

Pity instead the sinner who dies in unbelief. At the moment of his death his misery is just beginning. No matter how much such a one has suffered on earth, earth's worst day would be a most welcome relief for his soul in hell. We are filled with horror at violent death. How much more ought we to be filled with horror and deep sorrow at the death of an unbeliever – even the peaceful death of an unbeliever. Imagine (as

much as any mortal can imagine such a thing) an eternity in hell. Imagine writhing for all eternity in unspeakable and unending torment. The very thought makes us realize that spending a lifetime in reaching out to lost souls with the gospel ought naturally to be our life's work. A life of self-sacrifice toward this goal should rightly be our reasonable lifelong service.

With these thoughts in mind, we turn our attention to the subject of our text for this morning, Judas Iscariot. Also with these thoughts in mind, we cannot help but to be filled with horror and sadness at the eternal fate of Judas. Judas is one of the few souls in the Bible that we *know* to be in hell. (There are no doubt many others, but the Bible does not often specifically tell us their eternal fate.) In the case of Judas, Jesus himself called him **"the son of perdition"** and referred to him as one who **"was lost."** (John 17:12) Here is the kind of thing that ought to fill us with horror and sadness. Here is a soul that will spend an eternity in the terrible anguish of hell.

There is, of course, nothing that we can do for Judas. The best that we can do now, as far as Judas is concerned, is to learn from (to benefit from) his example. What mistakes did Judas make? Where did he go wrong? What could or should he have done differently? The hard, cold fact is that no matter what mistakes Judas made, no matter what sins he committed, all were forgivable except one. Judas' one fatal transgression was that he believed the lie that *he himself had to earn his own forgiveness*. By believing this lie of Satan, Judas rejected the forgiveness Jesus came to earth to earn, and it was this rejection of his Savior that caused his eternal destruction. Betraying the Lord was, of course, a terrible sin, but was it any worse than Peter's denial? As there was forgiveness for Peter's sin, so there was forgiveness for the sins of Judas. Our text for this morning tells us of Judas' answer to the Lord's offer of forgiveness. His answer was simply, *"No thanks. I'll do it myself."*

It may well remain forever a mystery as to just why Judas agreed to betray his Lord. It is probably much too naïve to suppose that he did it for the money. The thirty pieces of silver was hardly a tempting sum for so great a betrayal. The Bible tells us, in fact, that Judas probably had much more to lose financially by cutting his ties with Jesus. He was the keeper of the purse and had been in the habit of regularly helping himself to the money. It is hard to imagine that he would give up such a steady income (along with the other benefits that went along with his position as an apostle) for a relatively paltry thirty pieces of silver.

Judas no doubt had other reasons. Some have suggested that Judas had grown impatient, and that he was simply trying to force a final

confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leaders – perhaps even confident that Jesus would prevail. The thirty pieces of silver would then have been incidental – an opportunity to capitalize on the circumstances. In light of Judas' reaction when Jesus was condemned, this idea seems reasonable. Again, it was not the betrayal of Judas that condemned him; it was his unbelief.

Judas was lost because he rejected his Savior and tried to earn his own forgiveness. His attempts, in fact, were pitiful. Our text tells us that when Judas saw that Jesus was condemned he was filled with remorse. Remember that remorse (or contrition) is not the same as repentance. Remorse/contrition is the feeling of sorrow over what you have done. Repentance, on the other hand, has two parts: 1) sorrow over what you have done, and 2) a turning to (and trust in) Jesus Christ for forgiveness. Judas was remorseful. He was not repentant. How do we know this? Not from what he does next, for in returning the money Judas was, in fact, doing the right thing. A man who is truly sorry will not want to continue to benefit from his sin. The real window into Judas' heart is the path he chooses *after* returning the money. Our text says simply, **"And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself."**

We will probably never know just exactly what was going through Judas' mind as the rope snapped tight around his neck. One thing we do know: having rejected the only means of forgiveness available to mankind, when his life left his body, so too did any chance for repentance and forgiveness. The returning of the money, therefore, was not an act of repentance but remorse or contrition. It was a feeble attempt to undo the evil he had done. When this gave him no comfort, no security, he decided to offer the supreme, human sacrifice – his own life. In rejecting his Savior, Judas was struggling desperately to find some payment sufficient to cover the sins that tormented his very soul. What a pitiful spectacle – a sinful man was trying to offer something, anything, to a holy God as payment for a life of evil. Judas was still alive when he came to understand that simply returning the money was nowhere near an adequate payment. Tragically, his next attempt at paying what he owed (suicide) not only failed to pay that debt, it also left no opportunity for true repentance and forgiveness.

What exactly are we, as Christians, supposed to learn from all of this? Recognize, first of all, the true horror and eternal consequences of the lie that *"You need to earn God's forgiveness."* Forgiveness can only come to us through faith *alone* in Jesus Christ. Only Jesus could and did offer an adequate payment for our sins. Only Jesus had a life

unmarred by sin. Only Jesus, the Son of God, could pay so great a debt. Only Jesus. Trying to add our own goodness to that of our Savior doesn't enhance our chances; it destroys them. Every attempt to *add* to what Jesus did doesn't just *subtract* from what he did, it *cancel*s his divine payment. It excludes the one trying to add to it from ever benefitting from it.

Recognize also that Satan will continue to whisper his lies into your ears – continually urging you to imagine that there is something *you* must add to what Jesus accomplished; whether it is bringing yourself to faith, keeping yourself in the faith, living a good life, or carrying out certain acts of contrition, penance, or charity. Yet recognize too that understanding Satan's *goal* (which is that you join Judas Iscariot in the eternal agony of hell) is not the same as understanding and anticipating his tactics. Knowing his goal does not teach you how he will attempt to *accomplish* that goal. Through centuries of practice, he has learned that the direct, frontal assault does not often work on Christians. Do not therefore expect him to try to cram his lies down your throat – he has no such power. His plan is to seduce you into picking up and swallowing the lie all on your own. He has many effective strategies to lure you into such eternal self-destruction. He will use your guilt over your repeated failures to create a hunger for inner peace and confidence, and then he will attempt to persuade you that the solace you seek can be provided by your own hand, your own works. Do good things and your guilt will subside and you will then *be* good. He will attempt to persuade you that how things work in this world ("you get what you pay for") is also how things work in the spiritual realm. He will do his best to make you believe that how you feel about yourself (whether good or bad) is also how God feels about you. And he will parade before your eyes a never-ending succession of rich, popular, beautiful people who have already adopted his lie as their truth.

Reject it. All of it. Your salvation is complete in Jesus Christ. Cling instead to the Bible's clear, simple promise: **"For we hold that one is justified (that is, declared by God to be innocent of all sin) by faith apart from the works of the law."** (Romans 3:28) In this simple, pure truth is forgiveness, and peace, and life. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 10:5-13** Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. ⁶ ¶ Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." ⁸ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹ We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, ¹⁰ nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. ¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. ¹² Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

^{ESV} **Luke 13:1-9** There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." ⁶ ¶ And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' ⁸ And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

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The Third Sunday in Lent – March 24, 2019

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 7 (Red Hymnal)

"As We Begin Another Week"

The Order of Service – Hymnal page 15ff. (Red Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (1 Corinthians 10:5-13) We are never supposed to read God's Word as though we are spectators of the events recorded there. The lessons taught there are not taught only to others. The Holy Spirit here teaches us that we are rightly to apply the Word of God to ourselves, since that is the reason these words were recorded and preserved. Only then can we gain the full benefit that our God intends.

The Second Lesson: (Luke 13:1-9) The fact that bad things happen to a human being is never a valid indication of the moral character of that individual, nor of God's attitude toward that individual. This is Jesus' message in our reading from Luke's Gospel. Christians are supposed to thank our God for the good times, but never to turn on him in hard times. Nor are we to use his blessings as justification for ongoing sin in our lives.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 22. (Red Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 721 (Brown Hymnal)

"Cross of Jesus, Cross of Sorrow"

The Sermon – Text: Matthew 27:3-5 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Lies of Lent: "You Need to Earn God's Forgiveness"

The Offertory – page 22. (Red Hymnal)

The Prayers of the Day, Followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 389 (Stanzas 1-4) Red Hymnal)

"Not What These Hands have Done"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Red Hymnal page 24ff)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis (Red Hymnal page 30)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 48 (Red Hymnal)

"How Blest Are They Who Hear God's Word"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (28) Average (38) Wednesday (20)

This Week at St. Paul:

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| Today | -9:00 a.m. | – Sunday school and Bible Class |
| | -10:00 a.m. | – Worship Service w/communion |
| | -11:15 a.m. | – Fellowship and coffee hour |
| Wednesday | -5:45 p.m. | – Confirmation Class |
| | -7:00 p.m. | – Midweek Lenten Service |
| Next Sunday | -9:00 a.m. | – Sunday school and Bible Class |
| | -10:00 a.m. | – Sunday Worship Service |
| | -11:00 a.m. | – Fellowship and coffee hour |

CLC News – Teacher Paul Tiefel is considering the call to St. John's of Clarkston, WA. Teacher Andrew Roehl has returned the call to St. John's of Okabena. Missionary Peter Evensen has accepted the call to serve Bethel of Morris, MN until his May deployment to Togo. That congregation has also called Pastor George Dummann to serve them on a permanent basis. Pastor Mark Bernthal has returned the call to Resurrection of Corpus Christi. Faith of Markesan has called Teacher Neil Bernthal. Pastor Tang, the President of our affiliate church body in Myanmar, is recovering from a serious accident. He is currently receiving medical treatment in a hospital in India. He is receiving assistance for his considerable medical expenses through Kinship. Anyone desiring to help with those expenses can do so by designating an offering to "Kinship" in our regular offering.

Victory Service – The recent victory service for Prof. Ron Roehl can be viewed here: <https://tinyurl.com/y2jy5w5h>.

Daily Rest – We still have a couple of additional copies of Daily Rest available for anyone to use or share. Please be sure to add your name to the sheet on the mailbox table if you wish to subscribe to future editions, as well as the number of copies you want to receive. The cost is \$15 per year for each copy, which can be submitted with your regular offering.

Visitors' Day – Immanuel High School's Annual Visitors' Day is scheduled for April 26. See Pastor Roehl for more information.