

"Guilt"

Text: John 3:1-17

Grace and peace be yours in the name of our Savior God. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Have you ever considered just how detrimental guilt can be to forgiveness? *Forgiveness* is God's declaration that he no longer holds us accountable for our sins – having already punished his Son in our place. *Guilt*, on the other hand, is how we *feel* about our sins. The confession of sins we use in our page 12 Supplement liturgy deals with both – God's declaration concerning our sins *and* the disposition of guilt. In that confession we begin by acknowledging both our original sin (the sin with which all of us were born) and our sins of action (sins we have actually committed). Here are the specific words: "*Merciful Father in heaven, I am altogether sinful from birth...*" That's original sin. That's our confession that we were born sinful and therefore spiritually unclean and in need of forgiveness from birth. The confession goes on: "*In countless ways I have sinned against You and do not deserve to be called Your child.*" That's our confession that we were not only born with sin, we have also done what we shouldn't and have failed to do what we should. The confession concludes: "*Cleanse me from my sin, and take away my guilt.*"

Guilt is real, and guilt can be crippling. It can also, however, serve as an extremely effective tool when used properly and kept in its place. Those that don't know Jesus Christ should be riddled with the stuff. Christians, on the other hand, should have none of it. We need a better understanding of guilt. The text that the Holy Spirit will use to guide us to that better understanding is found in that well-known 3rd Chapter of John's Gospel:

ESV John 3:1-17 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with

everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ ¶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

So far the revealed Word and will of our God. With complete confidence that these are in fact the verbally inspired words of our God, his revealed word and will for our lives, so we pray: "**Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.**" Amen.

One of the countless things for which we ought to thank our God every day is the fact that he didn't make us all the same; that he didn't give us all the same gifts and interests. He made each of us with a very unique skill set. The intended result is that we could function not only as a society but as the body of Christ – the complete and fully staffed Holy Christian Church. You've probably met individuals who are on a whole different intellectual level. My experience is that for the most part they couldn't tie their own shoes without a flow chart and personal attendants. You and I, on the other hand, probably won't make any major contributions in the areas of nuclear physics or quantum mechanics, but we *can* manage our own shoe tying obligations.

The point this morning is that Nicodemus, a man who walked comfortably among the elite of Jewish society in Jesus' day, found himself immediately and hopelessly out of his league and over his head when he met with Jesus – the event described in our text. Nicodemus came from a world where everything probably made sense to his rational human intellect – including his general views on religion. Yet something was off. His soul was not at peace. Honest sinners are never truly at peace with work-righteousness. When truly honest, they are tormented with guilt. In fact it is just here that we see the proper function of guilt. I have no doubt that it was guilt as much as it was confusion or curiosity that pushed this good Pharisee out into the dark night and into the light of his Savior. Something about Jesus left Nicodemus uneasy. He alluded to his problem in the opening verse of our text: "**Rabbi, we**

know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

See the problem? The Jews, and in particular their religious leaders, wanted to condemn Jesus as a false prophet because of his new and strange teachings. Yet at least one of those Pharisees, Nicodemus, was troubled by guilt stemming from a logical inconsistency: *How could a false prophet perform such extraordinary signs without the power of God working in and through him? And if the power of God was working in and through this man, how could he possibly be a false prophet?* The logical inconsistency was throwing his entire salvation plan into doubt. If Jesus was truly sent from God, and if Jesus taught that man can never earn his own forgiveness and salvation by works, then the full weight of Nicodemus' sins would bore down upon his soul and guilt would torment his every thought.

The miracles Jesus performed created, at the very least, a logical inconsistency for those who witnessed them. Repeatedly Jesus pleaded with the Jews: ***"Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves."*** (John 14:11) So it is that we find Nicodemus slinking from the darkness of his own logical uncertainties and emerging into the light of that One who came to bring the light of understanding into our dark, falsely logical world. Remember how John, earlier in this same Book, described Jesus as ***"the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world."*** He went on to observe, ***"He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him."***

Nicodemus had no idea who Jesus really was, and his conversation with the Son of God demonstrated that he was clearly out of his league and in over his head. He was a member in good standing with the Jewish elite, but when it came to the truths Jesus was teaching he was obviously and absolutely lost. The result was that he said some things that were every bit as silly as anything I would try to contribute to a discussion on quantum theory. He began with, ***"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"*** and ended with the rather pathetic, ***"How can these things be?"***

Nicodemus was thinking *logically*, and his human logic *failed him miserably* when he tried to use his rational human intellect to understand Jesus Christ and the Christian faith.

Permit an example by way of illustration. Have you ever ridden a horse as part of an established trail ride? You quickly find that the horses know a good bit more than you do about where you are going. I went on one when I was a just a sprout, and still to this day I recall the guide telling us not to worry about trying to "steer the horse" because "he knows where he's going

better than you do." That is exactly how man naturally regards his own logic or reason. Reason is his horse, and he assumes it will get him where he wants to go if he will just give it free reign and allow himself to be led or carried along by it. Yet when it comes to Christianity, just the opposite is true. Nicodemus rode into Jesus' presence on the horse of his own reason. As such he assumed that his own reason would instinctively know the path to heaven. Jesus, on the other hand, knew that if this man didn't somehow get knocked off of the rational high horse he rode in on, his logical assumptions would carry him straight to hell. Man's natural logic *always* gives the impression that it knows what it's doing; that it knows the right way and is absolutely certain that it is on the right path. Again, the only possible destination, given that sort of reasoning, is always and only the gates of hell.

So it was that Jesus in our text threw Nicodemus' world into logical turmoil. He did this by first speaking in words that could not be understood by a non-Christian, and then concluded with words that could not be *misunderstood*. So it was that while Nicodemus just didn't get the spiritual concept of being "born again" and "raised up like the bronze serpent in the wilderness", he could not possibly miss the intended meaning of that great gospel promise in verses 16 and 17. There he was taught the logical inconsistency that is Christianity: a human being is not saved by what he himself does, but through faith in what another (Jesus Christ) has done for him.

That is not to say that understanding the Savior's words was the same as coming to saving faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit, never a rational decision made by man based on facts and logical conclusions. Among many other Bible verses, our New Testament reading for this morning from Romans 5:1-8 establishes this fact. By God's grace we are later given an indication that such saving faith may well have been created in Nicodemus, for he later not only defended Jesus in the Sanhedrin (John 7:50 ff.) he also openly cared for the Savior's body following the crucifixion (John 19:39 ff.) Handling a dead body on Good Friday, by the way, would have rendered Nicodemus ceremonially unclean and therefore unable to celebrate the Passover on the Saturday after Good Friday. It is, at the very least, a very good sign that he was willing to give up that which had once been so important to him, having finally found his "pearl of great price."

So much for Nicodemus. What does any of this have to do with you and me, and what does this have to do with guilt? Much in every way. You and I not only live in a world where logic and the rational reign supreme, that logic can also be the primary source of our guilt. There will always be a temptation, throughout our time of grace on earth, to try to force our beliefs to conform to our human standards of logic and reason. We experience this phenomenon every time a scientist cites "evidence" for

evolution, or "genetic justification" for sins like homosexuality. There will always be a part of us that wants to conform to the world's standards and longs to be accepted by our society. Even worse, we are continually plagued by our sense of fair play in connection with sin. Damning reason will always tell us that a human being can only make up for evil by doing good; that he can only make himself lovable to God by living a certain way or fulfilling some code of conduct. How difficult, as Luther put it, to *"pluck out the eyes of our reason"* whenever that reason stands in opposition to Biblical truth. The inevitable result, when we fail to live up to God's standard consistently, is guilt.

Nicodemus, like virtually all who hold to a "salvation by works" religion, must have been absolutely shot through with guilt. It would take some incredible mental gymnastics and some serious delusional thought to arrive at the conclusion that he, Nicodemus, had kept God's commandments perfectly – that he had measured up to the standard of perfection that the Law demands.

Jesus warned that ***"unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."*** (Matthew 5:20) The only sort of righteousness that exceeds the civic goodness of the religious leaders of Jesus' day (which outwardly was undoubtedly exemplary) is the righteousness supplied to us by Jesus Christ. The Christian faith is therefore based on the completely illogical teaching that God punished his Son in our stead - ***"visiting on Him the iniquity of us all"*** as the Prophet Isaiah put it. The result was the even more irrational truth that a human being is seen by God as absolutely sinless when saving faith is present in his heart – faith that despairs of our own goodness and trusts instead in the goodness of Jesus as our sin payment.

This is the one path to heaven, but be warned that this divine gospel truth will very likely never *feel* quite right to our natural sense of logic and fair play. Why would God the Father punish his own Son for what his Son did not do? Why would he then turn around and reward *me* with what I have in no way earned? This, however, is the simple, irrational glory of the gospel itself. It is the key – the one key – to eternal life, summed up by Jesus himself in our text: ***"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."***

Doubt it not because it makes no sense to your sin-addled human intellect. Rejoice instead in the unimaginable gift of life eternal that you have been given. Is it logical? Never – and thanks be to God that it is not. Logical and rational would have rightly called for eternal death in hell for every single sinner. Logical and rational would have required that we spend an entire

lifetime trying to do what we nonetheless were and are powerless to accomplish. Let this truth also be the antidote to your own personal guilt. If there is one thing that is consistent in every Christian it is our failure to live up to God's perfect standard in any way. We sin daily, and often. The fact remains, as we are reminded in our Supplement liturgy confession, God the Father not only placed upon his Son *"the iniquity of us all"*, he has also *"removed our guilt forever."* Christians can and should therefore approach the throne of our Heavenly Father free of all guilt – not because we have in any way measured up to the demands of his holy law, but because his Son *did* measure up, in our place and as our substitute. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we now exist – every moment of every day that faith is present in our hearts – absolutely free of all sin. Where there is no sin, there is no basis or reason for guilt.

This is the amazing truth of the gospel. Jesus Christ, by his perfect life and innocent death, has removed both our sin and our guilt. We really are now, in the view of our God, as perfect as was his Son, for God himself has declared that he now regards the faith (which he himself created in us) to be the equivalent of sinless perfection. Faith is now credited as righteousness. Your sin has been removed. Let your guilt be gone with it, replaced by joy and confidence in your Savior Jesus. Amen.

ESV **Genesis 12:1-9** Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." ⁴ ¶ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵ And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. ⁹ And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

ESV **Romans 4:1-8, 13-17** What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ⁷ "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." ¹³ ¶ For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. ¹⁶ ¶ That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring--not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷ as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"--in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."

ESV **John 3:1-17** Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ ¶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.



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The Second Sunday in Lent – March 5, 2023

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 156 (Red Hymnal)

"Not All the Blood of Beast"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

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

The First Lesson: (Genesis 12:1-9) It is hard to imagine the difficulties and dangers that Abraham faced when told by God to pack up and move his family to a foreign land. He lived in brutal, violent times where no civil authorities could be trusted to help. He placed his trust in his God, who alone can be trusted - whatever the circumstances. Having placed his trust in his God, Abraham was never disappointed.

Psalm 51 (Supplement page 28) (Brown Hymnal)

The Second Lesson: (Romans 4:1-8, 13-17) Our second reading actually builds on our first lesson. While Abraham was certainly an obedient and exemplary servant of his God, it was not through his works or actions that he was saved. As is the case with all mankind, Abraham was saved by grace through faith in God's promise of a Savior. So also here the Apostle Paul makes clear that it is wrong to imagine that Abraham was saved by any other means.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 141 (Red Hymnal)

"Enslaved by Sin and Bound in Chains"

The Sermon – Text: John 3:1-17 (Printed on the back page)

"Guilt"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 144 (Stanzas 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus, Grant that Balm and Healing"

The Prayers

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 144 (Stanza 5) (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus, Grant that Balm and Healing"

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 and around the world. 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 (35) Average (40) Wednesday (25)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
	-11:15 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting
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.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Pastor Neal Radichel has returned the call to Messiah of Eau Claire. Pastor Bruce Naumann is scheduled to be commissioned as the CLC Missionary to Tanzania in a service on Sunday, March 12 (coinciding with the CLC BB Tournament). Pastor Thomas Naumann has returned the calls to Redemption of Lynnwood and Ascension of Tacoma. Haley Seffens has accepted the call as kindergarten teacher at Messiah of Eau Claire. Seminary student Paul Agenten has accepted an extended vicaring call from Immanuel of Mankato.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet during the fellowship hour this morning.

The Season of Lent – Our special Lenten Season midweek services continue this Wednesday at 7pm.

Member Contact Sheet – Copies of the updated Member Contact list are available on the mailbox table. Please help yourself to as many copies as you might find useful.

Easter Flowers – The deadline for submitting the Easter flower order is this morning. The sign-up sheet is on the mailbox table.