

Sermon- 4-26-2015

Text- 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 & 54-57

Title- Victory Over Death

Today is our third week in a series we're calling: *Victory*. It's a series of messages, just a few weeks past Easter, where we are attempting to answer the question, what power does the resurrection have for us today? What does the resurrection of Jesus mean for us on a Monday morning when we're facing a pile of work? What about days when we feel burdened or broken? Does the resurrection of Jesus mean anything on those days? Does it hold any power for us in the everyday? To help us we're memorizing verses each week during the series. On the first week we learned this simple, yet profound verse from Romans 8:1. Can you quote it together with me? "*So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.*" We have victory of condemnation. Last week we learned Colossians 3:10, "*Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him.*" We have victory over sin.

This week we'll be looking at 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 & 54-58:

12 But tell me this—since we preach that Christ rose from the dead, why are some of you saying there will be no resurrection of the dead? **13** For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. **14** And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. **15** And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave. But that can't be true if there is no resurrection of the dead. **16** And if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. **17** And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. **18** In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! **19** And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world.

54 Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled:

"Death is swallowed up in victory.

55

O death, where is your victory? □

O death, where is your sting?"

56 For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. **57** But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Victory over death. That's our topic for today. The first 8 verses of our text talk about how to believe in the resurrection of Christ, but the last verses tell us how to live the resurrection.

The resurrection of Christ is not just something to believe in, it's something to live. Jesus is not a dead teacher. If he were a dead teacher then following Christ would simply involve believing what he said. Since he's a risen Lord, he comes to us not just with a teaching to believe, but a new way of life for us to live out. It's possible to be in such a relationship with Christ that his life—his resurrection life—comes in and characterizes our lives.

In verse 17 Paul says, "*And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins.*" Strong statement. Later he says three things that shed some light on this for us. He says, "*For sin is the sting that results in death,*" "*the law gives sin its power,*" and, "*thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

The entire chapter is about the resurrection. What Paul is saying is, the resurrection is the thing that allows us to overcome the sting of sin, and the power of sin. Now let's talk about this. Paul is

saying that unless you know and believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, you cannot experience the freedom and the power of a resurrected life. The secret to life, to a life that overcomes sin and death, is belief in a resurrection.

Paul says there's a way to be free. There's a path to victory over even our fears around death. Let's look at each of the three statements: "sin is the sting that results in death; the law gives sin its power; & victory over sin and death (is) through our Lord Jesus Christ." How does this happen? How does this work?

First, "sin is the sting that results in death." What does that mean? This is a very profound statement. It's what we talked about last week, really. Paul is saying that there is a guilt that permeates every part of our lives, so that everything bad thing we face has a sting to it. You see, death is the last enemy, but it's not the only enemy. There are lots of little deaths that we experience in life that rob us of joy. Our hearts long for joy, for love, for comfort and significance—they want all these things and there are all kinds of obstacles that rob us of joy. And they're all little deaths, but the sting of these things is sin. The sting of death and all these other troubles is this sense that we are guilty of our sin.

Let me explain. In my role as a pastor I often have the opportunity to hear people share about the difficult experiences and pain that they've endured. Often, when someone gets to the end of their sharing they'll wonder, "why am I being punished?" You see, sometimes it's not only the sting of our experiences—the pain and the hardship we endure can be brutal—but the real sting of it is the sense of being punished.

You see, all of our problems are double problems. There's the problem itself, and then the sense that "maybe I'm being punished." There's a sense of condemnation, which is what Jed talked about during the first week of our series. The sting of these things is sin. Guilt gets caked on us and we cannot avoid it—it's everywhere. Look at the bottom of a lot of your anxiety and you may find guilt. Look at the bottom of your anger and you may find guilt. If you're successful it's possible you feel guilty because you look around and think, "I've had all these privileges and there are a lot people who are as smart as me, what happened to them?" But if you're unsuccessful, you can feel guilty too, "what have I done wrong?" If you have children you feel guilty because you can't always do right by them, and if you don't have kids you feel guilty because maybe you should have. No matter what happens, guilt gets us whether we're coming or going.

It's not just our culture. It's not just our northeastern American upbringing that causes this. Go to India and watch the Hindus trying to wash their sins away in the Ganges river. Go look at the Buddhist statues that are full of these sin offerings (they put gold leaf flowers as sin offering at the foot of the Buddha). Now, maybe you'll say, "well that's just religious people who are full of guilt." But it's not. No, look at secular people too.

You might say that you're a modern person, you don't believe in God, or sin, and yet there's a voice inside you that calls you a coward. Calls you a fool. You can lay guilt at the foot of the family or the pressures of society, but they won't go out. Even those who say they don't believe in these things lay awake feeling guilty at times.

Here's an important question. Why? The popular wisdom is that guilt comes simply because we lay guilt on people in society or in families. But Scripture prompts us to look deeper. Scripture tells us that our guilt is more than just in our minds. At the bottom there is a guilt that we can't get rid of because we all have a sense of God, we all have a sense of condemnation, we all have a sense that we owe our Maker more than we can pay. The sting of death is sin. We sense that we're guilty and it's unavoidable.

Secondly, not only does Paul explain that sin has a sting to it, but there's power behind it. What gives sin its power? Paul says that "*the law gives sin its power.*" Put it this way. Paul is saying, and I'd like to make the case that he's right, that sin has a power to it. We can't seem to get it out of our lives.

I was thinking about all the ways that we try to avoid guilt and there are a number of them. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that so much of my behavior is guilt based. What do you do to get over your sense of feeling guilty?

One of the ways that we feel less guilty about our flaws and failures is by shifting the blame. It's not all my fault. They had a part in it too. I got this from them. Blame shifting. We spend a good deal of time doing that to try to relieve ourselves of guilt.

A second strategy is to redefine sin. This is something people do especially in college or in urban areas. You're encouraged to define your own moral standards, so when you feel guilty you say, "nobody believes that's wrong any more. People used to view it that way but I'm a modern person. I'm a liberated person. I can decide what's right and wrong for me." So you try to redefine sin, which is another way that people try to overcome and avoid guilt.

A third way (blame shifting and redefining) is just escapism. You escape from the guilty feelings by throwing yourself into something as a distraction. You can throw yourself into your business or work. You can throw yourself into all sorts of activities or pleasure. You can throw yourself into sex, or substances, or luxuries—all sorts of things. They distract you from this sting, from the sense of your guilt.

A fourth thing. You can listen to or provide gossip. Gossip is a guilt based event. Why does gossip sell magazines? Why do we find it delicious? Why do we love to learn about other people's foibles? TV shows, even so called news shows, have proliferated over the years that show the unseemly side of everybody. Why is this? Because all this gossip makes us feel less guilty ourselves. The reason to pass gossip along and the reason to listen to it (and everybody in this room will say, including me--I'll be the first to say I hate gossip and I don't want to listen to it—but I'm a human being too, and gossip is very tempting), is because it tastes delicious. Why? By comparing myself with others through fault-finding, by gossiping and listening to gossip we're actually dealing with our own guilt. There's no other reason for it.

A fifth way people deal with guilt is to be an overachiever. "See, I'm really a pretty good person."

A sixth way to deal with guilt is to be a rescuer. You help people. You save people. You take messed up people and you get them straightened out.

But you see all of it, blame shifting and redefining sin, escapism and gossip (having a critical spirit), and over achievement and rescuing people, all these things are desperate maneuvers to try and get past the guilt that we all feel—the sting of sin—and they don't work. They don't work. Because sin has a power to it. We can't get rid of it.

Sin has a power to assert itself with unrelenting effectiveness in spite of all lapses in time, in spite of all changes in ourselves or in our environments.

Paul says the power of sin is the law. What he is communicating is profound. If there was no law of God, sin would be only in our minds. Guilt would only be in our minds, and of course it's in our minds, but it's not only there. What Paul is saying is, the reason sin has a power is because it's more than just in our minds. If it was, we could deal with it in all these sorts of ways we talked about, but it's not.

Sin has a power to it because it's not just in our minds it's legal. It's actual. It's real, because of the law of God. Put it this way. Why does Scripture say that it's right to love and nurture, but it's wrong to kill and destroy? Why? Because God is love, and because God is love, love is real. Love is right. The law of God is nothing more than the nature of God revealed. It's an extension of who He is. He is honest so the law says be honest. He is loving, so the law says don't kill and don't steal. He is patient so the law says forgive. Reality is a result of who God is, and the law of God is an objective standard of what's right and wrong. It's a real standard, and because it's real there is a real debt. And that debt has to be paid for.

If I have destroyed someone else's property, I don't just feel guilty. I am guilty. I don't just feel guilty—I owe something. So if I sit down and confess my sin to someone and explain how I feel bad about what I've done, that's the guilt that's in my mind, but then there's the real guilt—the fact that I'm going to have to pay for what I destroyed. In the same way, Paul says that the reason sin has power is that there's a real God, there's a real law, there's an objective standard that we have violated.

Then he share this final verse, **57** *"But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Paul says that the resurrection is the blade that slices through this guilt and death. It slices through not just the guilt in our minds, but our actual guilt, which is the law. How?

Growing up I had very little experience with death. This isn't unusual, I suppose, except for the fact that my father was in ministry and consequently had to perform a number of funerals. I don't know if it was his decision or my mom's but they kept my brother's and I away for most of these. As a result I had little exposure to death or loss until I got older.

In the years that I spent in ministry myself, I began to not only attend funerals, but on occasion to perform them. This broadened my experience with loss, but not even performing a funeral can prepare you for your own experience with loss.

When my wife and I discovered two years ago that the child she was carrying had serious defects as a result of a chromosomal anomaly, we were shattered. The doctors explained that it was unlikely the baby would survive the pregnancy, but even if she did, her life would be very short. The months that followed were like a slow dreadful march. Normally we would have been preparing a room, purchasing clothes and a crib, but instead, we were in mourning for an even that hadn't yet happened.

As we entered the ninth month our heart's desire was to be able to at least bring this little one into the world where she could be held and loved for the brief moments that we could share. Sadly, this wasn't meant to be. Just days before we were to deliver we learned that our little girl's heart had stopped beating.

On the day my daughter Ava came into this world, she made no sound, and her little body did not move. It was a silent room. My wife and I were heartbroken, the pain of the experience nearly too much to bear, but we had two daughters to be strong for. Together we spent the next day with Ava, holding her, mourning her loss, crying with one another because she would not be coming home with us.

It's one thing to talk about sin and condemnation and death. It's another to experience first hand what loss is. Some of you have known loss, and deep grief. Some of you have not, but it is likely that you will.

What does it mean to believe in the resurrection? To believe that it's true is to believe that Jesus died to save you—to redirect the trajectory of your life toward God, instead of away from Him. The truth of Jesus' resurrection is of most importance, eternally, for all mankind. It's the pivotal moment in all of history. Believing in the resurrection means belief that God has accepted you, for Jesus' sake, through an act of supreme grace. But what's next? Does the resurrection mean anything for my life now? Oh yes.

It means absolute wholeness and well-being—physically, socially, economically, and spiritually. When John the Baptist sent a messenger to Jesus in Mark 11, asking, "Are you really the Messiah? Are you the one who is bringing the kingdom of God?" Jesus answers: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." (Mt. 11:5) That is the kingdom of God—complete healing. We will be reconciled to God; to nature; to each other; and to ourselves.

And the degree to which that future is real to you, changes everything about how you live in the present. For instance, why is our suffering so difficult to endure? Why is it so challenging to see people face disease and discomfort? Why is doing the right thing such a strain when we know that it will be costly? Why is the loss of our money or our reputation, or even our lives something that creates such fear in us? Why is facing the death of a loved one or even our own death so painful? It's painful because we think this broken world is the only one we'll ever have. It's easier to believe that our money is ours now, and we might not ever have any more, or that these bodies of ours are the only ones we'll ever have. But if Jesus rose from the dead, then our future is so much more certain—so much more beautiful than that.

Some of you may know who Joni Eareckson Tada is. She was in an accident when she was seventeen, and became paralyzed from the neck down. While she was trying to come to terms with the results of this horrible accident, she would go to church in her wheelchair.

The problem with being in a wheelchair, she found, was that at a certain point in her church's service every Sunday, the priest called everyone to kneel—which drove home to her the fact that she was stuck in a wheelchair. Once she was at a convention in which the speaker urged people to get down on their knees and pray. Everyone did except for Joni. "With everyone kneeling, I certainly stood out. And I couldn't stop the tears," she wrote about that experience. But it wasn't because of self-pity. She was crying because the sight of hundreds of people on their knees before God was so beautiful—"a picture of heaven." And then she continued weeping at another thought: *"Sitting there, I was reminded that in heaven I will be free to jump up, dance, kick, and do aerobics. And...sometime before the guests are called to the banquet table at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, the first thing I plan to do on resurrected legs is to drop on grateful, glorified knees. I will quietly kneel at the feet of Jesus."*

Then she adds: "I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed in righteousness—powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope that the resurrection gives someone who is spinal cord-injured like me?"

Only in the gospel of Christ can people find such transcendent hope. Only the resurrection promises a new body, in addition to new minds and hearts. They will be perfect, beautiful, and without a hint of disease or decay.

If you are unable to dance, and you long to dance, in the resurrection you'll dance perfectly. If you feel alone, in the resurrection you'll know perfect love. If you feel empty, in the resurrection you will find satisfaction that fills you completely. God loves us so much that he gave His only son so we could be redeemed and made right with Him. That's what we have to look forward to.

And when you realize that this world we live in is temporary—our bodies, and minds will one day be replaced with perfect ones—what can possibly shake you? Can cruel words drown out the hope that we find in our resurrected King? Can troubles or hardship cloud the joy we know is ours in Christ?

The resurrection means that we can look forward to the day when our suffering will be no more. But it even means that we can look forward with hope to the day our suffering will be glorious. When Jesus showed Thomas and the other disciples his hands and feet, he was showing them the remnants of his pain. The last time the disciples saw Jesus, they thought those holes would be the ruin of all their hopes and dreams. They thought they were a part of something special—ushering in a new kingdom and a new king. When they watched the nails go into his hands and feet; when the spear pierced Jesus' side they believed those wounds had destroyed their lives. Yet now, in his resurrected body, Christ's scars are still visible.

Why is this important for us? Because now that they see the scars, the sight and memory of them will increase the glory and joy of the rest of their lives. Seeing Jesus' scars reminds them of what he did for them—the holes they thought had ruined their lives actually brought them salvation.

On the day we meet God face to face—the day that God makes everything right—on that day, the same thing will happen to our own hurts and sorrows. We will find that the worst things that have ever happened to us in our lives, are in the end, only an enhancement of our delight. On that day everything will be turned inside out and we will know a joy beyond anything we've ever experience in this world. The joy of that day will be greater for every scar we bear.

So, live in the light of the resurrection and the renewal of this world, and of yourself. It is a glorious, unending dance of grace.

"Death is swallowed up in victory.

55

O death, where is your victory?□

O death, where is your sting?"

56 *For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. 57 But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ.*