

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ² As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

³ They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. ⁶ The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

⁸ So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (Genesis 11:1-9)

God Won’t Let Sin Win!

This past week, my sister sent me one of those chain e-mails. It was a slide show entitled “Close your eyes and go back.” It was a long, nostalgic look at the way summer was when people my age and older were growing up. It invoked every possible image – bike rides and Saturday morning cartoons and catching lightning bugs and first kisses. You name it, it was probably there. The whole point was that a simpler time is over. Do you feel that way? Like the America we once knew – a land of hard work and community and honesty – has been replaced by a society full of disrespect and greed and sexual promiscuity and looking for a free ride? I do. Now, I don’t believe that any society in this world is truly a Christian society, because we live in a sinful world. But we did once live in a society whose idea of right and wrong roughly corresponded to what the Bible says is right and wrong. Today, we live in a society that constantly pushes the limits and that openly attacks Christian ideas. But today is the day of Pentecost. And the lesson of this day is that God is more powerful than all the hosts of hell and all the forces of sin. No matter how bad things get, **God won’t let sin win!**

I.

The place where we begin to see that this morning is in our Old Testament lesson. Babel appears to be Babylon. If so, this account tells the story of the beginning of one of the most ancient civilizations on earth. That beginning was tarnished by pride and rebellion against God. But **God won’t let sin win! He curbs its power with the law.**

This story really begins with the end of the great flood. A couple weeks ago, we talked about how God destroyed all life on earth, but preserved the one believing family left: Noah’s family. After Noah and the animals in the ark came out, God blessed them and commanded them to spread out over the face of the earth. We could speculate at length about why he commanded that, but the point is, God loves us. Believers accept that and do what he commands. But that’s not what happened. They didn’t spread out. Instead, Noah’s descendants migrated as a group to the plain of Shinar, which is the Bible’s name for Babylonia. Today, we call it Iraq.

The plain of Shinar was well watered and fertile. It could support a large population. These descendants of Noah reached the conclusion that they would be happier if they all stayed together in one spot. They knew what God had commanded. But the conventional wisdom of the day disagreed. That’s why they began to build a tower. They used the best materials and methods available to them. They intended to make a monument that could be seen for miles around. They hoped that this monument would become a rallying point that would enable them to stay together there in the plain of Shinar and to be unified in their approach to life.

Why was that so bad? For the simple reason that it was not what God commanded. No matter how good our reasons sound, when we defy what God tells us to do, when we come up with one “good reason” after another to do something different, when we think that we know better than God what would make us happy – that is always sin. And it will always cause problems for us in this life. Even more important, that sin always drives us away from God. If it runs its course, it will destroy our faith and send us to hell.

So God dealt with that sin. He said, **“If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.”** This was not a compliment. God wasn’t talking about their potential the way that we might talk about how far our kids could go if they keep getting A’s or keep scoring touchdowns. He was talking about the power of sinful beings to achieve evil. When God saw the descendants of Noah gathered in opposition to his plan for him and building a tower to unify themselves against the word of God, he concluded that unless he did something, no sin that this people wanted to undertake could be stopped.

So God confused their languages. He modified the way our brains work so that now there is a natural tendency for languages to develop. Languages die out and new languages come into being. God did that to break up the sinful society that was rising in rebellion against him. He did that because he knows all things and he knew how terrible we would become if he didn’t act. The funny thing is, most wars have been fought between people of different cultures and languages. All those differences, all the prejudice and hatred for people who are different – all that is only possible because of this judgment of God. If that is better, what would the world be like if we all still spoke the same language and we were all gathered together in a megacity in Iraq in total opposition to God?

God did this out of love. He limited sin’s power. But he did not end that power. Sin still runs rampant in this world. God still uses his law – both in the sense of commands and of punishment – to limit the damage sin can do to us here. One of our members told me last week that someone stole a trailer loaded with dirt bikes right out of his neighbor’s yard. I agreed that was terrible, since he lives less than a mile from my house. But that same week’s news told us that Thailand is on the verge of civil war and terrorists blew up a bomb in downtown Kabul. And I spent four hours this week rototilling my wife’s garden – and I didn’t have to duck to avoid a bullet once. God’s law works as a check to sin. He puts governments in place who limit the power of sin. He puts consequences in place that keep the worst of our behavior under control. And we suffer less because of it.

Isn’t that truth the source of our nostalgia? The good old days were good because God’s work to keep sin in check seemed clearer to us. You couldn’t download internet porn when I was a kid. And you could run around with the kids on your block all summer long without your parents worrying about whether you had been abducted. Even though the world has changed, God hasn’t. His law still limits the damage that sin does to us here. Things could be so much worse. But the law never defeats sin. No matter who we elect, no matter what laws we put in place, no matter how well we discipline our children, the law only keeps the power of sin in check.

II.

To break the power of sin we need something better: we need the gospel of Jesus Christ. That gospel is the power of God. And that power is what Pentecost is all about. Thousands of years after he scrambled our languages and put up a barrier that limits our ability to understand each other even today, God showed that that action was temporary. The final solution came through Christ. **God won’t let sin win. He breaks its power with the gospel.**

Notice the parallels between the two events that we hear about in our readings for today. In the Old Testament lesson, all of humanity spoke one language. And God came down and scrambled those languages. In the reading from the book Acts, like today, people spoke many different languages – look how many are listed there! But the Holy Spirit came down from heaven and he gave the apostles the ability to speak in languages they had never learned. God overcame the division that the sin and pride of man caused.

But the miracle was temporary. The apostles had this gift. And there are a few other references to a similar giving of the Spirit in the book of Acts and in one or two other places in the New Testament. But that’s it. Today, this gift is gone. When I was called to serve as a missionary to Colombia, I had to spend a lot of time studying Spanish after spending eight years studying to be a pastor. I had to spend years in Colombia talking like a kindergartener. And those wonderful Christians I served there had to put up with my horrible accent for all the time I was there. God did not give this gift for all time. But he did give it. He gave it for one simple reason: the gospel is the solution to all of sin’s power. We need to hear the gospel in a language we understand. If a pastor preached about Jesus to us in Russian, it could be the most beautiful sermon ever preached. But most of us wouldn’t get any benefit out of it because we couldn’t understand that message. The gospel has to come

to us in our language because God has chosen to do a miracle through human speech. He has chosen to change our hearts with a message. We need to understand that message.

The message is Christ. As important as it is for us to have laws and policemen and our conscience to limit the power of sin, more laws and more policemen and more brutal consciences can't end the power of sin. They can only drive it underground. Every one of us is a sinner. Even if we were born in a good Christian family, remember after the flood, the only family left was a family of believers. Their descendants rebelled against God. We all inherit sinful hearts from our parents. We all still have a sinner inside us who hates God and hates all the ways God curbs our sin. Given the chance, that sinner will seize control of our lives and drive us straight to hell.

But Jesus came to defeat the sinner in our hearts once and for all. He alone of all the people who descended from Adam and Eve had no sinner in his heart. He was perfect in his heart and his mind, so he was also perfect in his life. Because he was the Son of God, his perfect life counts for all of us. Because he was the Son of God, when he offered that life on the cross as the payment for our sins, that payment counted for every person who has ever lived. It counts for you and for me. The blood he shed there washes away our guilt. God forgives us; he chooses to treat us as if those sins never happened. When Jesus rose, God made that promise to you and to me.

That gospel message frees us from the power of sin. Even though we will have that unbeliever inside us for the rest of our lives here, we are no longer slaves to sin. God reached into our hearts and put a believer inside us, a believer who loves the word, a believer who loves God and wants to live for him. He put a believer inside us who fights against the unbeliever inside us every single day.

Now, in this life, we will never be free of our sinful nature. Sadly, that means that even our best efforts here will always be contaminated by sin. We can never claim that we've earned heaven. For that reason, we have to say that our real life is hidden with Christ. The life that God sees when he looks at us, the life that we will live in heaven, that life is hidden even from us. We continue to see our failures and our struggle with all the ways that sin wins in our lives here.

But our new life is real, even if we can't see it. God sees it. God put it there. He will never forget it. And God works through the gospel of Jesus Christ to strengthen that believer inside us. God forgives our failures and he renews us to start the fight over again today. And one day, we will be totally free. One day, we will stand with Jesus. These bodies will die and we will live in heaven. Already then, the sin in our hearts will be gone forever. And one day Jesus will return and raise the dead. He will purify the believers who are still alive here. And we will live in joy with him. Then, we will be one, truly united, not against the word of God, but united with Christ, heart and mind, forever.

My friends, sin will lose. It will go to hell and never bother us again. Sin has lost already. Jesus beat it when he died and paid for it and then he rose from the dead. Sin is losing right now, because God is working through the gospel to keep our faith alive and to give us the power to fight against sin now. It may not always feel that way. In fact, it may feel like sin has totally conquered the society we live in. It may feel like sin has so much power over me that I'm an embarrassment to Christ. But God won't let sin win. The gospel is the power of God. And he will keep on working through that power. He will keep your faith alive. He will inspire you to fight against sin and he will bring you at last to live with him. Amen.