

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. (Colossians 2:13-17)

God Cancelled What We Owe

What does cancelled mean? It means something's over. If your favorite TV show gets cancelled, they're not making any more episodes. If a church service gets cancelled, we're not going to have it. And if a debt gets cancelled, the person who owes the money doesn't have to pay it. That debt is just gone. Now, if you're someone that GM or Chrysler owes money, that's a pretty scary concept. The bankruptcy judge might just cancel the debt and you'd have nothing. But if you're Chrysler or GM, that means you're free of that debt. God uses that image of cancellation to teach us about our relationship with him and what that means for our lives day by day. **God cancelled what we owe.**

I.

To ask the Lutheran question: what does this mean? Not surprisingly, it means forgiveness. I know it seems like that's what I talk about week after week, but that's because forgiveness is the heart of our faith and our lives. In this particular portion of Scripture, God talks about forgiveness in several different ways. St. Paul wrote, **"When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ."** We were once dead. Obviously, not physically dead, but spiritually speaking, we were dead. When someone is dead, they're cut off from everything and everyone that mattered to them when they were alive. That separation lies at the heart of the Bible's concept of death. We were dead in sin means that our sin cut us off completely from God.

What sin is Paul talking about? He describes it as "the uncircumcision" of our sinful nature. When God commanded Abraham to be circumcised, Abraham obeyed as a sign of his faith. Because he trusted in God, he did what God told him to do. But the sinful nature we were all born with does not trust God. It trusts only in itself. That means there's a part of me that figures I'm the only one I can count on. There's a part of you that thinks the same way. Since that part of us does not trust God, it has no interest in living the way God tells us to. So that sinful nature constantly rebels against God.

Our sins are those acts of rebellion. I often ask the kids if they've ever talked back to their parents or picked on their siblings. They start to squirm a little because they know they have. And we adults know that we're guilty of all kinds of sins, too. Have you ever hated someone? Have you ever sat and pouted because you didn't get your way – you didn't get that good deal at work, you didn't get to go where you wanted on vacation, you didn't get to make the choice about whatever issue was going on in your family this week? Have you ever been cruel? Have you ever gossiped or run someone down? The list could go on and on. We human beings were born dead in sin and the uncircumcision of our nature. We were born totally separated from God.

But before we could do anything about that, God made us alive to him. God came to us in the gospel and he put faith in our hearts. In the gospel in baptism and in the spoken word, God came to us and he forgave us. Now, forgiveness is a kind of church word. I don't know if we really understand it. I wonder how many of us ever asked someone to forgive us? I wonder how many of us have ever said, "I forgive you?" To forgive is to pardon someone. A president can simply wipe away a person's guilt – not the guilt they feel in their hearts, but the guilt on the legal record. If I robbed a bank and shot the tellers and ran from the police, after I was arrested and tried and convicted, the president could still pardon me. He could simply set me free. That's what God did when he forgave us.

We didn't earn that pardon – which is the difference between us and God. Usually the president pardons people that he feels are deserving. They've shown remorse. They've worked to make restitution. They made a

really big donation to his political party. That's not what God does. He doesn't wait for us to earn our pardon. If he did, we'd never be forgiven. God simply says, "You're free."

He does that because of Jesus. Paul wrote, **"He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross."** God nailed the written code to Jesus' cross. That's why God pardoned us. We didn't do anything to earn it. Jesus did. He died to pay the penalty God's law requires for our sins. Now, in Greek, Paul used an unusual word here which our Bibles translate as "the written code." What this word really means is a hand written list of all the debts you have with someone. So, relative to God, it's the list of our sins. It's the list of all things that we should be punished for. Right on that list is what our Bibles call "the regulations." Paul imagines for us a list of every sin we've ever committed. Right next to the sin is the commandment we broke. That legal document was sitting on God's desk. And what did God do with it? He cancelled it. Instead of making us pay for our crimes, he nailed it to the cross when he nailed Jesus there. All that we are guilty of is gone forever.

On Friday, I got a phone call from someone who wanted some financial assistance. Their family was staying in a hotel and they needed someone to pay the bill or they'd get thrown out. Now, the hotel didn't care who paid. They just wanted the money. So the person asked me to come and pay it. That's what Jesus did for us. Because of our sins, we owe God death and hell. But Jesus laid down his life and paid for us. And he paid for it all. No sin is left unpaid for. There is nothing that you have done that still stands on that list. God did all that before we were born. He did it before we had faith. When Jesus hung there on the cross, the Son of God knew that he was dying for you. Two thousand years ago, he knew your name and he cancelled your debt.

Paul says he triumphed by that cross. He **"disarmed the powers and authorities,"** he **"made a public spectacle of them."** To all human eyes, it looked like Jesus lost when he died. Nobody came and freed him. Nothing bad happened to the soldiers who drove the spikes through his hands and feet or to the Jewish leaders who mocked him in front of the crowd. In point of fact, he didn't even last as long on the cross as most criminals did. Crucifixion usually took days, but Jesus died within a few hours. But, my friends, he won that day because he paid all that God demanded for our sins. Early Sunday morning, Jesus subjected the devil and all the powers of hell to ridicule because the tomb couldn't hold him. Death itself was powerless to keep him. Jesus rose. Then he descended into hell itself to proclaim his victory and then he returned to show his disciples that he was alive. **God cancelled what we owe. He nailed it to Jesus' cross.**

I.

Now, I don't think I've said anything too surprising this morning. But this is the heart of our faith. And it has a bearing on our lives. If we lose this teaching, we lose Christianity. And we lose the life that pleases God. St. Paul was writing to a specific congregation at a specific moment in history. He was actually in prison in Rome. Colosse, the city where the Colossians lived, was over a thousand miles away in the country we call Turkey today. A destructive false teaching had entered that congregation. We don't know all the ins and outs of what people were teaching. But some things are clear. First, they denied that Jesus had done all this to save us, probably by denying that Jesus really was the Son of God come in human flesh. Second, they called on the Colossians to earn their way to heaven by obeying a combination of Old Testament rules and pagan philosophy.

Paul reminded them of the heart and core: Jesus. We don't live Christian lives to earn a place in heaven. We can't earn a place in heaven. We're sinners. We live for Christ because God has cancelled all we owe. But we can understand the confusion of the Christians in Colosse because the false teachers there were really good at pulling things out of the Bible. In the Old Testament, God did command that his people observe certain holidays and festivals – Sabbaths, a monthly New Moon festival and annual holidays like the Passover. Each time they celebrated these festivals, they offered sacrifices. In the Old Testament, God did tell his people that they couldn't eat pork or shellfish or a number of other things, some of which surprise us and others which we wouldn't eat either. God regulated every aspect of their lives.

But he didn't do that for all people everywhere. He did it only for the Jews and only until Jesus came. Paul said, **"These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."** Shadows tell us things. If someone comes up behind you and you see the shadow on the floor, you can tell things about them – whether they're fat or thin, tall or short. Maybe if they're a man or a woman. Maybe if they're wearing a hat or not. But once you turn around and face the person, you don't look at the shadow to know what they look like. You get clearer information by looking directly at the person.

All those Old Testament laws taught God's people about Jesus before he came. They taught that God hates sin and his people need to separate themselves from it. They taught that sin makes us guilty and we can never come into God's presence with that sin. It has to be washed away. The only way to do that is by blood. Now that Jesus has come, we know that his blood has washed away our sins. We know that now that his blood has taken our sin away, we can come into God's presence. God no longer sees us as sinners. He sees us as he sees Jesus, as perfect and holy. Because we are now free from sin and punishment, we live a new and holy life. We try to reflect the new person that God has made us to be. The best way to learn that lesson is to move beyond the shadows of the law into the clear gospel of Christ.

My friends, today, we are still in danger from the kinds of false teaching that Paul warned the Colossians about. Every false teaching attacks the gospel, sooner or later. Always, they try to make us focus on what we do rather than on what God has done for us. Sometimes, false teachers focus us so firmly on ritual that they forget about Jesus. Now, rituals are not sinful. Wearing robes, lighting candles, having a church year is something God lets us do, as long as those things focus our attention on him and what he did. But as soon as those things become a bunch of rules that we have to follow or getting to heaven is uncertain, we have a problem. As soon as somebody thinks they're more Christian because they do those things, we have a problem.

But it isn't only in ritual and ceremony that we find people leading us away from Christ. Most churches today focus totally on your life. They call it practical Christianity. Most Christian bookstores are filled with books about how you're supposed to live differently, how you're supposed to commit yourself to God, how you're supposed to do or give or change. Most so-called Christian music is an endless, mindless refrain telling you that you need to praise God. Now, do we Christians praise God? Of course we do. And if we don't, there's a problem. Likewise our lives do need to change and we do need other Christians to teach us how and why. But the emphasis has to be on Christ, not on me. If the word we use most in our praise and the word we read most in those books is "I" then we have found ourselves wallowing in the same kind of false teaching that Paul warned us about two thousand years ago.

God has given us a better road: Jesus. He died. He rose. He sent his Spirit into our hearts and gave us faith. Now, filled with the Spirit, he calls us to follow him. He calls us to dedicate our lives to serving him, not to earn anything, but because we already have everything. He has set us free, and that makes us want to follow him. **God cancelled what we owe. He set us free to live with Christ.**

Being set free gives us a whole new direction for our lives. And you are free. All of your sin, all the charges piled up against you, are cancelled. God nailed every one of them to the cross with Christ. And then he gave you a new life in him. Live that life with joy and dedication. Amen.