

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: ... “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

³⁷ *When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”*

³⁸ *Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”*

⁴⁰ *With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

⁴² *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:14a, 36-47)*

What Shall We Do?

When I was eleven or twelve, one night, my little brother came into my room. He was three or four. He had a drink and he shared it with me. I thought it was Kool Aid, and that he could get more, so I drank it all. But it was an orange pop that my mom had opened for him and there wasn't any more. I doubt he even remembers that, but I do. Sometimes, that little thing crops up in my mind and I feel guilty.

Guilt is not our favorite topic, is it? Many therapists and psychologists believe that guilt is a bad thing. It's a crippling emotion and we need to get rid of it. When people we know struggle with guilt, we often say things like, “You shouldn't feel that way,” or “You're a good person.” But you know what? The guilt remains. In my ministry, I've talked with people who struggled with crippling guilt over words they said to parents who've died, or over the way they destroyed their marriages, or over other things they had done or said. Many of us remember a thousand things, little and big, that we did or said and we feel guilty about them.

Guilt is real because being guilty means that we deserve to be punished. The jury hears the evidence and their verdict is guilty. In that sense, we're all guilty before God. We feel guilty when we know that, when all our excuses and justifications fail. What can we do about our guilt? That's the question that the people in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost asked the Apostle Peter. That question is fundamental to the human condition in every time and place. **What shall we do?**

I.

Peter had an answer. It applies to us. **What shall we do? Cling to Jesus.** Why did these people feel so guilty? Peter said, **“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”** Making Jesus both Lord and Christ shouldn't bother us. But the people who were listening to Peter zeroed in on the other part of what he said, “whom you crucified.” They could not deny this accusation. After 1500 years of waiting for the Savior to come, they had crucified him. Luke tells us **“they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’”**

Guilt is the natural result of our sin. No matter how hard we try to deny it, no matter how unhealthy our society tells us guilt is, when we come face to face with God's law and we have to examine our words and deeds, our thoughts and feelings, we can't help but feel guilty. We know that we have not lived up to what God calls us to be. God summarizes his law with one simple word: “love.” True love means that I always put the one I love first. It means that I sacrifice all that I am and all that I want for the one I love.

God calls us to love him first of all. If we truly loved God, we would never sin, no matter how much we wanted to. Every time I give in to temptation, I'm loving that sin more than I love God. I'm sacrificing Jesus to my own sinful flesh and desire. God commands us to love each other. Every husband who puts his greed or his lust or his temper ahead of his wife sins against her, because he's loving that sin more than he loves her. Every

wife who puts her need to be the boss or her lust or her discontent ahead of her husband loves those sins more than she loves him. When we're selfish and self-absorbed, we break God's law of love. All that sin nailed Jesus to the cross. And when we come face to face with those sins and that guilt, we understand the way Peter's audience felt. We understand the desperation in their question: **"Brothers, what shall we do?"**

Peter said, **"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."** Repent means confess to God the things we feel guilty about – I have not loved you, Lord, as I should. I've put my sinful lusts and desires ahead of you. I've worshipped what I want and forgotten what you command. And I have not loved my spouse, my children, my friends and family, I have not loved my enemies or strangers the way that you have loved me. Again and again, I have loved myself and put what I want ahead of what they need. I'm guilty and I deserve to be punished in hell.

But that is not the end of what repent means. It also means trust in Jesus' forgiveness. That's why Peter told them to be baptized. In baptism God washes us clean. Baptism is much more than a symbol. Baptism takes away all that we're guilty of. How can that be true? Because baptism gives us what Jesus did for us. In baptism, we put on Christ. Imagine that just before church started this morning, I spilled coffee down the front of my shirt. You can't tell if I really did or not, can you? Even if my shirt is dirty, the robe covers it – the white robe that represents Christ. When you were baptized, you put on Christ, like a white robe. He covers all your sins. God sees the perfect life of Jesus when he looks at you. God hides all your sins from his own sight.

In baptism, God gave you the very death of Christ. Jesus suffered and died and he paid for all the sins of all people everywhere. Not one sin of one person is left unpaid. But how do I get the benefit? Peter says that in baptism, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. He comes to me personally and gives me Jesus' death. And he gives me the resurrection of Jesus. He gives me God's guarantee that all my sin is gone forever.

Peter told the Jews to repent and be baptized because they had not been baptized yet. Nearly all of us have been. Does that mean that the sins that we commit afterward baptism aren't taken care of? People often think of it that way. In fact, there was a period in the ancient church in which it became customary to wait as long as possible to be baptized, until just a moment before you died, if you could, so that all those sins would be paid for and you wouldn't have enough time to sin any more. But that was not the way Jesus intended us to understand this gift. Once you are baptized, it lasts forever. God places you into a new covenant, a new relationship with him. Once you are baptized, you are forgiven of all sin, past, present and future. That means that every time you feel guilty, you can go back to your baptism and know that God has loved and forgiven you. You can know that it is impossible for you to sin more than God forgives.

Peter says, **"The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."** Baptism is not something that we do. It's a miracle that God does through the word and promise that he connects with the water. The water is just water. But when God adds his word to the water, it becomes God's personal guarantee that you are bought and paid for and forgiven. God can even do that for babies. In baptism, God creates faith in the hearts of our children and he forgives them and claims them, too. The importance of that gift was brought home to me when I was a vicar. I preached a sermon about baptism. After church a woman said to me, "We need sermons about baptism." Do you want to know why that sermon moved her so much? A few years earlier one of her children, a small boy, had drowned. Knowing that God claimed him in baptism was her greatest comfort.

It is ours, too. Even though most of us don't remember the day we were baptized, on that day God came to us personally. On that day, he made an eternal promise to us. When guilt tortures us, when we feel that there is nothing we can do to have peace, God says to us, "You belong to me. I sent my son to die and rise for you. I gave you everything that he did when I claimed you in baptism. I forgive you today. You will be mine forever." My friends, there is no greater force to give us peace than that.

II.

Now, maybe you've detected a flaw in all that I've been saying. If God forgave me over forty years ago when he baptized me as a baby, if that forgiveness counts for all the sins I'm going to commit in my life, then doesn't that mean that I can live any way that I want to? No, my friends, it does not. Jesus died and paid for all of our sin. God forgave us once and forever. But forgiveness is not a license to sin. If I treat it like that, then, I'm throwing God's grace away. Faith never says, "How can I sin and get away with it?" Faith says, "Now that I am forgiven, how can I love God more? How can I love my fellow man more?" Knowing that we

are forgiven changes us. So, when God eases our pain and takes away our guilt, we still have that same question to ask, although, now it means something different. **What shall we do? Devote yourselves to Lord.**

But make no mistake about it: devoting ourselves to the Lord is a battle in this sinful world. No Christian will ever be perfect. Just because I repent today does not mean that I won't sin tomorrow. Even though we teach our children what is right, and even though we've said it a hundred times, they're still sinners and they have to fight that battle over and over again. We all have to fight the battle against the sin in our hearts all our lives long. The devil has been doing this for six thousand years. He keeps wearing us down, waiting for a moment when we aren't paying attention and then he hits us with a temptation to commit our favorite sin. And boom! We're tortured by guilt. We feel that we deserve hell.

But God knows what the devil is up to. He established the Christian church to keep us on the road to heaven. He put us together here at Peace Lutheran Church so that we can help and encourage one another in our endless battle against sin. In this chapter of Acts, God shows us a healthy congregation. Luke tells us, **"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."** They didn't just go through the motions. They devoted themselves – it was a part of their lives. They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching. In other words, to hearing sermons and coming to Bible class. They cared about doctrine. They cared about all that Jesus taught them. The more they understood the love and the plan of God in Christ, the more they were prepared to fight the good fight of faith.

They devoted themselves to the fellowship. No Christian can make it on his or her own. We need the brothers and sisters who gather here to help us resist temptation. We need each other to give us peace and forgiveness when we fail. That's why the devil spends so much time trying to disrupt our congregation with gossip and stupid arguments. If we can't get talk to one another and share our struggles with one another because we don't trust or like each other, well, then the devil has us on the defensive. The congregation in Jerusalem devoted itself to the breaking of bread. This does not mean potluck suppers. It means communion. They came to the altar to receive the body and blood of Christ to know that their sins were forgiven. They came to be built up in the faith. And they devoted themselves to prayer because all that we face here is in God's hands. He alone has the power to overcome it.

All that attention to the word and sacraments had a tremendous impact on that congregation. They had an amazing stewardship program. They shared what they owned. Those who had more money or possession sold what they had so that the poor would be taken care of. Now, God never commands a communistic system. But when believers come together in love and in the spirit of the gospel, God does things we wouldn't believe were possible. God continued to bless this church. People saw the love and the devotion to the Lord and they wanted that for themselves. Every day, more people came. This was the fastest growing church in history.

What does all that have to do with us? Just this: we are here for the gospel. We've come to hear how much Jesus has loved us. God will work through that message. God will take care of our congregation's financial problems. God will strengthen us to resist temptation and God will forgive us when we fail. God will build us up in love toward one another so that we can help and encourage and forgive one another. God will keep us strong in the faith until we reach eternal life. That is the ultimate solution to all that we struggle with here. Guilt is a part of this world because sin is a part of this world. But we don't belong to this world anymore. We belong to Jesus. We belong in heaven. Jesus washed us clean in baptism. We will live with him forever. Amen.