

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.¹¹ And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

What did You Used to Be?

What did you used to be? Before I was pastor here, I was pastor in Muskegon. Before that, I was a world missionary. But I wasn't always a pastor. I spent a few years in the army. I spent a lot of years in school. It's interesting, if you ask a man to talk about who he is, almost automatically, he'll do what I just did: talk about his job. So, most of you men are probably thinking of the answer to my question in terms of jobs you used to hold. If you ask a woman about who she is, most of the time, she'll talk about her family. So, many of you women today may have thought in terms of your family before you were married or before you had children. But however you think of the question, we all have a life history. Sadly, it isn't always positive. What did you used to be? That question can bring to mind unpleasant memories. It might make us think of choices we made and the price we paid in terms of ruined marriages or lost jobs or damaged reputations. Well, whatever else is true about us, right now, we are children of God, bought and paid for by the blood of Christ, and declared to be holy in the sacrament of Holy Baptism. We are members of God's own family. But that wasn't always true, not for any of us. Today, through St. Paul's words to the congregation in Corinth, I want to ask you to reflect on this question: **what did you used to be?**

I.

St. Paul does not ask that question this morning. He simply says, "**That is what some of you were.**" He's talking about a list of troubling sins. He mentions sexual sins, like adultery and homosexuality. He talks about being thieves and drunks and slanderers – the Greek word means "verbally abusive" people. Now, he doesn't say they were all like that. He says that some of them were. But still, the list is pretty bad. And he slides in one more thing: idol worship. Why throw that one in? Because it's the heart of all other sins. Whenever we do something God tells us not to, whenever we embrace an attitude God forbids, whenever sinful desires rule our hearts, we're telling God that we love that sin more than we love him. We think that sin will make us happier than God will. Every sin is worshipping an idol. Most of the time, the idol is ourself. It's our own greed or pleasure or ego.

St. Paul points to all those terrible sins and he says, "That is what some of you were." Notice: they were not that kind of people anymore. The gospel had changed them. Do these words apply to us? The things that Paul mentioned were all real life issues – things that were common in the ancient Greek world. Things they saw every day in Corinth. But Paul wasn't talking about the sins that ran rampant outside his congregation. He was saying that these things used to be true about the people inside it. Could he say the same thing about us today? My guess is that most of us probably would say no. Most of us are lifelong Christians. When we hear Paul say that some of them used to be adulterers or homosexuals or thieves, that doesn't resonate with us. But even if that's true, one part of what he says is absolutely true for every one of us. We were all idol worshippers once. Maybe we don't remember it, because we were baptized as babies and we grew up in Christian homes. But every human being is born an unbeliever. We worshiped ourselves and our wants and our needs long before we thought about worshipping any kind of god.

And we still struggle with idolatry because every sin is a form of idolatry. St. Paul knew that those Christians in Corinth still had a sinful nature. If you read 1 Corinthians, you'll find that it goes on for chapter after chapter about all the sinful attitudes and actions in that congregation. These Christians were guilty, over and over again, of sinful words and deeds, of sinful thoughts and feelings. They all had idols in their hearts that wanted to climb back on their thrones and take over their lives again. That is one hundred percent true of us today, as well. We all feel temptation because we all have a sinner inside us. Sad to say, everyone one of us has special areas of sin that show that we are not in heaven yet – and they indeed may be the kinds of sins Paul

was talking about. If God summoned us to his court and examined our lives and our hearts, he'd have to rule that we're guilty of the same sins that we were guilty of before we came to faith, and maybe even of more.

But even though that's true, we are changed. St. Paul says, "**And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.**" As far as God is concerned, all our sin is over. How can God rule that our sin is done? He's God. He knows all the secret sins that we never want our church to hear about. He knows how we're going to fail today and tomorrow. How can he view us as done with sin? How can he consider that we are different now? Because of what he has done for us. We were washed – every one of us – in the waters of Holy Baptism. The water was just plain water. But God combined it with his promise of forgiveness in Christ, so in that water we died with Jesus. In that water, we rose with Jesus. In that water, God washed away every sin that we had ever committed and also every sin that we ever will commit.

In that gospel promise, we were sanctified. With this word, Paul is talking about coming to faith. The word means that we were made holy in God's sight and set apart for heaven. We now belong to him. In the Old Testament, God taught that some things belonged to God and some things belonged to this world. And if they touched, either the holy thing was polluted or the thing of this world became holy – it became dedicated to God. God has touched us with the good news. He put faith in our hearts. He set us apart as his. That does mean that he calls us to live a new life. But first, it means he took our sin away and called us holy.

All of which is to say we were justified. In his courtroom, God declared us not guilty. Not guilty of all the lusts of our hearts and any sexual sins we ever committed. Not guilty of all the harsh words we ever spoke and of all the stealing of time at work or of little things that rich organizations will never miss. God declared us not guilty of all the idolatry in our hearts, of all the times we loved sin more than we loved him, of all the times we loved ourselves and did what we thought would make us feel good instead of trusting in him and doing the hard thing. God declared that none of that sin ever happened.

How could he do that? Because of Jesus. Our Savior was perfect for us. Perfect in heart and mind, perfect in word and action. And God gives us credit for him. And God punished him for our sins. Jesus died in our place. He paid all that we owe. Then he rose and God said that we are free, that we are holy, that we are his. Jesus did that for the whole world. And when he brought that good news to us, he reached into our hearts and gave us faith and now we have the benefit. We are personally justified, declared not guilty, for all the sin we will ever do. **What did you used to be?** Whatever it was, **trust that God doesn't see you like that anymore.** He sees you as a perfect child of God, because that's what Jesus was.

II.

But when that truth works in a sinful world, a difficult question comes up: why be good? If Jesus has already paid for the sins that I haven't even committed yet, if Jesus paid for the whole world, why should I worry about changing my life? I'm forgiven. I can just sin and be sorry later, right? **WRONG!** You were sanctified. You were set apart as God's own child. You were separated from all sin and dedicated to the Lord. Or as St. Paul said, "That is what some of you *were*." Not are. Were. That personal justification – being declared holy and righteous by God changes our hearts. God calls us to live the way that he sees us, the way that he declares us to be.

If the Holy Spirit has truly changed your heart, your life must change. Now, I would never tell you that it's possible to be perfect in this life. But God does still command you to be perfect. God expects that each day, you will wake up and rejoice that yesterday's failures and sins are gone and then rededicate yourself that day to living for him. God does expect that the New Man he planted in your heart will rise and fight the Old Man and strive to live for Christ every day.

So we need to leave behind all those sins that Paul told the Corinthians they had left behind. The society the Corinthians lived in had a lot in common with our society. Sexual sins were very prominent. Homosexuality was very common. Those sins are so prominent today that we're supposed to accept them. I saw a poll this week that said that more than 90% of gays in America feel that our society is becoming more accepting of them. Sex outside of marriage, living together and internet pornography are mainstream in our society. And that's not all. Our society relishes a good put down and considers profanity to be a sign of eloquence. And how many people are scrupulously honest anymore? How many scams out there are targeting your credit card number, your social security number, or your bank account? How many people figure that

stealing from a bank or a credit company or shoplifting is OK because those big companies have so much money?

But the question for us today is not whether our society is going to accept gay marriage. It's whether we are going to honor our spouses and live in love with them. It's whether we are going to lust after people we see in real life or after electronic images on our computer or our television. The question is not whether our society revels in profanity and insults, it's whether we laugh at those insults and copy that way of speaking. The question is not whether we are going to wring our hands at how dishonest people are today. It's whether we are going to pay all our taxes because God tells us to, including sales tax on internet purchases. It's whether we are going to help our neighbor to keep and maintain his property and means of income. It's whether we are going to be content with what God has given us. In the end, it's whether we are going to make God the center of our lives and strive to follow the life he lays out for us.

Will we do that? Can we do that? On one level, no. Not perfectly. We are sinners and if we had to stand before God on the basis of our success or failure in following him, his justice would send us to hell. But we don't stand before God on the basis of what we do. We stand before him in Christ. So he views all our feeble, imperfect efforts as if Jesus had done them. He views them all as perfect. Live the way God sees you! God will give you the strength to do it through the gospel. And at the end of each day, thank him for every success and trust in him to forgive every failure. But live for him. That is God's call to us. You aren't lost, condemned sinners anymore. You are saints. You are children of God. **What did you used to be?** It doesn't matter anymore. **Be different than you were!** Live as a child of God.

I read this week that a 94 year old man in Minnesota was caught by the government. It turns out that he was a Nazi during World War II and may have participated in massacres in Poland. He lied about it when he came here and lived quietly for decades in this country. Is he still the man who did those terrible things during the war? I don't know. But I imagine he spent years hoping no one would find out about his past. Now the whole world knows. Regardless of what our government does about it, that man illustrates what God has done for us. He has washed our past away. We don't have to look over our shoulder and wonder when we're going to get caught. God knows exactly what we were and what we are now. God sanctified us and changed us through his gospel message. Trust that he forgave us and made his children. Live like the child of God you now are. Amen.