

OUR LIFE TOGETHER

LESSON ONE: LIFE TOGETHER - IN JESUS

What is a Christian? Is it a person who grew up in the church? Is it a person who denies being a Muslim or a Hindu or a Buddhist? Is it a person who respects the life and teaching of Jesus?

We believe a Christian is much more than any of those definitions. As we begin to learn about our life together, we must learn about the faith that unifies us in Jesus.

WHO ARE WE?

Who can ever forget the election of 2000? After weeks of haggling about hanging chads in Florida, it all came down to a ruling from the Supreme Court.

We happened to be watching NBC. Dan Abrams and Pete Williams, standing on the steps of the Supreme Court, shivering in the December chill, frantically flipped through the decision that would determine the outcome of the presidential election.

Was it good news or bad news for Al Gore? Was it good news or bad news for George Bush? No one was really sure, at least at first.

Does our life together begin with good news or bad news? Both. The start is bad news, but soon our hearts are turned to very good news.

The bad news begins with an understanding of who we are before God.

We are *sinners*. What a way to open a study! But it is the testimony of the Bible.

In the book of Romans, Paul is describing how we are all alike in one way: our rebellion against God. He quotes a Psalm which declares,

*There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God...*

Sin is a word we can use in many ways, but here is one of the basic definitions: it is a *missing of the mark* before God.

Have you ever shot a bow and arrow? You aim for the target. If you aim too high, too low, too left or too right, you miss the target. That is what sin is like. God has set a standard for us, and we have all missed that target.

We miss the target in what we *think*. God knows what is on our minds. Do you think he likes what is there? Hatred? Lust? Selfishness? Anger? Pride?

We miss the target in what we *say*. God knows what is on our lips, and he knows that sticks and stones *and words* can hurt other people.

We miss the target in what we *do*. God knows what is in our lives, and he does not need a phone camera to record how we go astray.

This “missing” includes what we think, say and do, and what we *fail* to think, say and do. If I see you in some sort of distress, and I can help but do not, I have failed to think with compassion about you, speak with kindness to you, and love in action for you.

A pastor once explained it this way: let’s say you sin three times a day. If you know me, you know that is being far too generous! But for the sake of simplicity, let’s assume that.

Let’s then say that you live 70 years. That adds up to over a thousand sins a year, and over 70-thousand sins over the course of a lifetime. Think of that: before God, you have missed that much!

The point is not the numbers, but the reality behind the numbers. We are sinners.

Even worse, *we are unable to change our sinfulness*.

The story is told of a scorpion who asks a frog for ride across a river. The frog refuses. He says to the scorpion, “You will just sting me.”

“No, I won’t.” says the scorpion.

The frog agrees, and about halfway across the river, the scorpion stings the frog, and as they begin to sink, the frog cries, “Why did you sting me?”

The scorpion says, "It's my nature."

In Ephesians 2:1-3, Paul writes hard but true words about our nature:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world...All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

By nature, because of who we are, we are objects of God's wrath! Bad news!

By nature, because of who we are, we are spiritually dead. Worse news!

We are not just out of order. We are not just under the weather. We are dead in sin. We sin, and we cannot just snap our fingers or change our hearts to stop sinning.

This is the story of the human race, ever since the first man and woman sinned against God. In that moment, something fundamentally changed within our spiritual DNA. Instead of lovers of God, we became haters of God. Instead of servants of God, we became rebels against God.

WHO IS GOD?

But who is God? I am reminded of the history of the "Green Giant" advertising campaign. In the early days, he was one mean-looking guy. Now, he is smiling and jolly.

We like the nice one better. It is true of advertising, and it is true of God. But while God is a God of love, and he created smiling and jolliness, there is more to him.

God is a God of holiness.

Speaking of advertising, are you old enough to remember the Ivory Soap commercials? The line was, "Ivory is 99 and 44/100ths percent pure." That's good, but not God. He is 100% percent pure.

The prophet Isaiah discovered this when he was ushered into God's presence. There God was declared to be, "Holy, holy, holy."

But what is holiness?

First, it is *purity*. Not 10 percent. Not 50 percent. Not 99 percent. Full. Complete.

Second, it is *separateness*. If you are pure, you will separate yourself from anything that might give you even a hint of moral blemish. God and sin are like oil and water. They don't mix.

What does this mean? If we are going to live in relationship with God, now and forever, we must be holy. If he is holy, there can be no other way. But we are not.

The news gets even worse. God is also a *God of justice*.

Let's say you go to court. The defendant is there, and he is as guilty as, well, sin. Everyone knows it. The judge says, "I know you did it, but don't worry about it. I release you."

What would you think of that judge? You would say, "He's a lousy judge!"

If God is just, every sin will receive justice - now or in the life to come. That sounds harsh until you are a victim of sin. Then you know how hard and cruel it is. Then you wish for a just God. He is just.

Think of this, as well. If you kill another average person, that is bad. If you kill a police officer, that is really bad. If you kill the President of the United States, that is as bad as bad can be.

Why? *Because the seriousness of the offense is related to the nature of the one who is offended.* Our sin against others is bad enough, but think of sin against a perfectly holy, perfectly just God. It is truly terrible.

The bad news hurts. But we have to see this.

Happily, God is something else. He is a *God of mercy*.

Are there any more glorious words, than the words of Psalm 103?

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;

he does not treat us as our sins deserve...

Finally, good news! God is willing and able to be merciful and forgive the sins of sinners.

But how? How can God be just and merciful? How can he punish sin, yet still save sinners?

WHO IS JESUS?

The answer is Jesus. He reunites sinful people with a holy God. But how? We all know about Jesus, but do we know all of who he is, and all of what he has done? Let's notice four truths.

1. HE CAME.

In John 1, the gospel writer declares,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

As you read through John's words, you realize he is talking about Jesus. John is declaring that Jesus is the eternal Son of God. Just as God is eternal, his Son is eternal.

The story of Christmas is not the story of the start of Jesus' life. It is the story of the start of Jesus' life *on this earth*. As the eternal Son of God, he came to live as a man.

Do you understand this? Do you fully grasp this? Can you wrap your mind around this like you can wrap your mind around the fact that $2 + 2 = 4$? Of course not. This is a mystery revealed in the Bible, but beyond our comprehension.

2. HE LIVED.

For some 30 years, Jesus lived on this earth. Why? Was he taking a tour? No. He was *living without sin*.

In Hebrews 4, the writer declares that Jesus was tempted to sin, but unlike Adam, he succeeded. He is the "second Adam." The first Adam blew it. The second Adam nailed it.

Why is this important? Think of who sent Jesus. His Father. From the first breath of his life to the last breath of his death, Jesus pleased his Father.

This means he is worthy to do something no one else can do. He can represent us before God, and get us right with God.

3. HE DIED.

Don't we all? Yes. But Jesus' death was more than just a death. It was a *payment for the sins of his people*.

Think of the Old Testament system of sacrifice. If you have ever read all the way through it, you know it is rooted in one idea: sin requires the shedding of blood. Sin demands death.

In the Old Testament, pure animals were sacrificed. They shed their blood as *substitutes* for the people of Israel. They died in the place of people.

But all this sacrificing was not the end of the story. It was a preparation for the coming of Jesus, the life of Jesus, and most importantly, the death of Jesus. In Hebrews 10, the writer declares Jesus to be the One who offered himself for the sins of his people. He sacrificed himself, once for all, for our sins. Not for his sins, for he had none. For our sins.

Now, let's go back to the question: how can God be perfectly just and perfectly merciful?

* Because God is just, a price had to be paid for sin.

* Because God is merciful, he provided a substitute to pay for that sin.

Sin separates us from God. Jesus reunites us to God, because he receives our punishment for our sin.

Think of it this way: if God is just (and he is), someone will pay for your sin. Either you will pay for it forever, or Jesus has paid for it once. Which do you prefer?

4. HE ROSE.

Don't forget Easter! We do sometimes. But it is vital, because it is Jesus' demonstration that he is the Person he claimed to be.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is wrestling through the question, "Did Jesus really rise?" He writes, *If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.*

Then he declares, *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

In Jesus' death, he defeated sin. In Jesus' resurrection, he defeated death!

This is great stuff. The news is definitely getting better. But now we wonder, how do we receive this for ourselves? The Bible offers one answer, in two words: *repentance* and *faith*.

WHAT IS REPENTANCE?

Suppose you are driving from New York to Los Angeles. You enter the interstate, and as you happily drive along, you see a sign that says, "Boston, 100 miles."

What do you do?

You change what you are thinking. You thought you were on the right road, but now you realize you are not.

Repentance is a change of thinking. Maybe you used to say, "Who cares what God thinks about my life?" Or, "I'm sure God is just thrilled with me." Now words like David's burn in your heart:

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.*

Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me.

*Against you, you only have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.*

No arguing. No rationalizing. Just a heart that says, "You are right. I am wrong."

Then what? *You change what you are planning.* Now that you know that you are on the wrong road, do you continue down that road? No! You find the quickest way to turn around.

Again, you are close to the heart of David:

*Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

You may get off track again. You may find yourself on the road to Seattle, instead of Los Angeles. But you are resolved to follow a new path.

How do you become a Christian? How do you begin the process of entering a new life together with Jesus and other Christians? It starts with humility - a humility that repents of sin.

My favorite gospel story is of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee comes to God with full confidence...in himself. He thanks God that he is not like those “sinners.”

The tax collector does just the opposite. He falls before God and says, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

That is the heart of the gospel! But there is more...

WHAT IS FAITH?

We are not just turning *from* something. We are turning *to* something. That something is Someone named Jesus.

After Paul persuaded the Romans of their sinfulness, he prodded them to believe in Jesus:

That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved (Romans 10:9-10).

What is faith?

First, it is *conviction about the truth of Jesus Christ.*

Jesus came as the Son of God. Jesus lived without sin. Jesus died for sinners like me. Jesus rose to defeat death. You believe these claims to be true.

But there is more, because as Jesus said, even the demons know all that!

Second, it is *trust in Jesus Christ for salvation.*

On a twenty-mile Boy Scout hike with my son, we spied a bridge ahead. It didn’t look too good. I said, “I wouldn’t walk across that!”

As we drew closer, we saw a car drive across it, and we realized it was probably stronger than we first thought.

A while later, as we headed back in the other direction, we saw the bridge again. To our amazement, we saw *a large pickup truck with a boat* drive across it.

The driver of that truck was trusting that the bridge would take him where he needed to go! In the same way, faith is trust that Jesus will take us where we need to go: to be with God forever.

How will my sins be forgiven? How will I receive eternal life? Only Jesus.

I love the Heidelberg Catechism's first question:

Question: *What is your only hope in life and in death?*

Answer: *That I belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all of my sins...*

That is the faith that starts our new life with Jesus, and guides our new life together.

WHAT IS OUR NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

So what is this new life like? We close this lesson with four words.

1. We are *justified*.

What does a judge do? He declares a verdict. When we are justified before God, he has declared this verdict on us: we are not guilty before him anymore.

Why? Because we are so good? No! Because God is a judge who says, "Don't worry about it?" No!

We are not guilty, because Jesus has given his righteousness to us. We have lost the guilt of our sin, and we have gained the goodness of Jesus, credited to our "account."

Therefore, writes Paul, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We are free from worrying and wondering about how God will deal with us when we die. Because Jesus is our Savior and Lord, the Judge will declare, "Not guilty!"

2. We are *adopted*.

What if God said, "You are forgiven, but you better stay away from me"? How would you feel

about that? Would you feel secure in his love, and seek to love him back?

Happily, God does the opposite. Paul writes in Romans 8, *For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'* *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.*

We are God's children! He loves us. He cares for us. He protects us. Yes, sometimes he must discipline us. But in the words of one pastor, he will love us "anyway and always."

3. We are being *sanctified*.

We are "putting off" the old habits of rebellion against God, and "putting on" the new habits of our relationship with God.

This is a lifelong process. Will we ever "arrive" in this life? No! Nein! Nyet! But with the help of God's Spirit in us, we can and will grow more and more into the people God has re-created us to be...in our homes, our workplaces, our neighborhoods...everywhere.

4. We will be *glorified*.

The new heavens and new earth await. We will be with Jesus when we die, but once he returns, we will be living in the new heavens and the new earth - without sin, and with him.

This is the hope of the Christian. We may suffer in this life, but we will triumph in the life to come. First the cross, then the crown. This hope gives us strength and joy in this vale of tears.

What is the heart of our life together? Our faith in Jesus. We believe in Jesus as Savior from sin, and follow him as Lord of life.

We are not saved by our works, but we are saved to do good works.

We are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, so we follow Jesus Christ.

Paul writes in Romans 12, *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, that you offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God...*

Jesus has offered the dying sacrifice that reunites us to God. So now we offer the living sacrifice

of ourselves, as we eat and drink and work and play and do everything with thankful hearts for him.

How can we desire anything less?

A story is told of Abraham Lincoln attending a slave auction. He picked out a beautiful young woman and purchased her. As they walked away, he turned to her and said, "You are free."

At first, she did not understand. But when she did, she rejoiced and said to Lincoln, "I want to go with you."

Jesus has set us free. We want to go with him. This is the essential truth that we believe and proclaim at Christ Presbyterian Church. To God be the glory!