

The Lies of Lent – Lent 2019

"Your Forgiveness is Incomplete"

Text: John 11:17-27

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Have you ever tried to use something like a micrometer to drive in a nail? I hope not. Driving a nail calls for a hammer, and a micrometer is a precision measuring tool. It would be a classic case of us using something in the way it was not intended, with the inevitable result that you not only don't accomplish what you want, you destroy the intended function of the tool.

On this Maundy Thursday evening, we focus primarily on the amazing gift that Jesus himself gave to his Church "on the night he was betrayed" – the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper was given as a spiritual tool. As such, it has an intended function. As with most other tools, it is more than just *possible* to damage or destroy its intended function by misusing it, it is inevitable. In fact in our present society it is arguably misused far more often than it is used as our Savior intended.

This evening we will therefore focus on our Lord's gift of Holy Communion, examining both what it is and what it is not – both its intended use or benefit and how it is misused. What we will find is that the misuse or abuse of this sublime gift is the natural result of falling to yet another of the devil's *Lies of Lent*. The particular lie which we will expose this evening is the lie that *Our Forgiveness is Incomplete*. The text that will both expose this lie and guide our hearts onto right paths is found in the 11th Chapter of the Gospel of John:

ESV(John 11:17-27) Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. ²⁰ So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

These are the words of God. In great awe and reverence we therefore treasure these very words of God and struggle to rightly understand and apply them. So too we pray, "**Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.**" Amen.

When the Nazi invasion of England became a very real threat in the early days of the Second World War, one of the rather simple measures taken by the British was to remove all of the directional signs throughout the countryside. The reason was obvious. The locals would still be able to move about freely (they didn't need the signs to find their way) while an invading enemy would not. Had the Germans invaded, they would certainly have known that they were in England, and they would undoubtedly have known their general location. They might not, however, know exactly how to get where they wanted to go.

Satan uses a very similar strategy on Christians. He knows that he will probably have little success in denying the reality of Jesus altogether. He also knows that he will have a tough time denying that Jesus came to die for our sins. His only hope therefore is to cause confusion in our hearts as to "how to get where we want to go." In other words, most Christians recognize their own sinfulness, and most recognize that we cannot stand before a holy God covered with the stain of sin. A perfect, holy God

cannot tolerate imperfection. The confusion Satan desires to sow in our hearts is just how and when sin is removed so that we can stand before a holy God without fear on Judgment Day.

There is no denying that we sin. The Bible tells us in no uncertain terms that this is so, and we know it as a fact from our own thoughts, words, and actions. If, therefore, we are ever to stand in the presence of a holy God, then we must have forgiveness for our many sins. Those sins must be removed. How and when is this accomplished? Satan's best hope to destroy the Christian's soul in hell is to convince us of the very lie we expose this evening: *Your Forgiveness is Incomplete*. If the devil can convince us of this simple falsehood, this one lie, he knows he has a chance at capturing our souls. He knows from experience that when man believes something is needed, man most often believes that he himself must earn, provide, or supply what is lacking. If man's *forgiveness* is not complete, then man will almost certainly try to earn, provide, or supply the forgiveness that he feels is lacking.

Do you recognize the danger? Whenever man tries to pay the bill for sin, Jesus is nullified. Whenever man tries to earn forgiveness, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross is set aside or cancelled. Jesus cannot be a savior for the man who tries to save himself.

To expose and counteract the lie that our forgiveness is incomplete, we turn to our text for this evening – admittedly a rather unlikely Maundy Thursday text. Unlikely because we find nothing here of the Lord's Supper or the Savior's words on the night he was betrayed. We do, however, find ample evidence to expose as a lie the notion that our forgiveness is incomplete, which in turn will tell us much about Maundy Thursday and the Lord's Supper.

When Lazarus died, his sisters were obviously filled with sorrow, and yet theirs was the sorrow of the believer. Mary and Martha loved their brother and would obviously miss him very much, yet their sorrow was not the hopeless lamenting of the godless. In marvelous terms they described their confidence in the resurrection: **Martha said to (Jesus), "I know that he (my brother Lazarus) will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."** This evening though we are more interested in Jesus' words to Martha, for in reply Jesus said to her: **"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."** It is, even more precisely, this last sentence that is the most important for our purposes this evening: **"everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."** Just what does this verse say? What is Jesus telling Martha? What is he telling us? A bit of concentration and thought are required here, but the benefit is well worth the effort.

Just as there are three kinds of death, so there are also three kinds of life: physical, spiritual, and eternal. Our text is a great example of the interrelationship of all three. Lazarus no longer lived physically, but that did not mean that he had died spiritually. Just the opposite was true. Since Lazarus was alive spiritually when he died physically, he also continued to live eternally. That sounds complicated, but we say exactly the same thing when we say that a Christian (someone who is spiritually alive) goes to heaven (lives eternally) when he dies (ends his physical life). In the key words of our text (**"everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die"**) Jesus is talking first about spiritual life and then about eternal life. Most critical to our purposes this evening is his statement that everyone who believes *has* eternal life. Jesus uses the words **"shall never die,"** which mean the same thing as "has eternal life." Note well that he does not say *"shall have eternal life"* but *"has eternal life."* In other words, he **"shall never die."** Jesus also said in John 6:54, **"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."**

The key here is that Jesus lists nothing whatsoever but faith as that which is necessary to possess eternal life. It is therefore only through faith that we have full and complete forgiveness of sins. A man who has faith has forgiveness of sins. God will never allow anything sinful into his heaven, but he welcomes all who have faith. To have faith, therefore, always means that forgiveness is complete.

Neither is the Bible silent on this topic elsewhere. In Acts 13:38-39 we read, ^{ESV} **(Acts 13:38-39) "Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, ³⁹ and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be**

freed by the law of Moses. "Here, as in all other passages of Holy Scripture, forgiveness of sins is always presented in "all or nothing" terms. Never does the Bible say "*Some of your sins are forgiven,*" or "*Most of your sins are forgiven,*" or even "*The sins you committed since your last confession are forgiven.*" Jesus never forgave *some* sins. He remitted all or none. Matthew 9:2, ***And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."*** In Colossians 1:12-14 we read, "***The Father... has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.***"

The reason we cannot have partial forgiveness is that faith, not human character, quality, or action, is the deciding factor in God's eyes. When faith is present, Christ's perfection is assigned or credited to us. That's what it means to live "in a state of grace." All sins are charged to Christ's account and we are in constant possession of his perfection, which obviously includes total forgiveness. That is why the Holy Spirit says in Romans 4:5, "***And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.***" When that faith is not present, the payment of Christ is rejected and we have *no* forgiveness. The payment has been made for those sins, but the faithless man rejects that payment. Since it is faith alone through which we are justified by God (declared by God to be not guilty), therefore it is clearly a lie of the devil that speaks of partial or incomplete forgiveness of sins. Again, forgiveness is all or nothing. It can never be partial or incomplete.

Here we find the relationship to the events of this evening, Maundy Thursday. Jesus did not give us the Lord's Supper as a means to fill in the gaps of our incomplete forgiveness of sins. He gave it to us as the means to assure us that the payment for our sins has already been made on the cross of Calvary. It was, as he said in Matthew 26:28, his *body and blood* that won our full and complete forgiveness. That forgiveness is now ours the moment the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts, for "***faith is counted as righteousness***" in God's system of justice. (See Romans 4)

Is it then wrong to say that we "get forgiveness" in the Lord's Supper? Yes and no. It is a product of the devil's lie (that "*our forgiveness is incomplete*") to imagine that forgiveness is parceled out to us only occasionally (like a spiritual mortgage payment) or that, by communing, certain of our sins were removed from our ongoing spiritual debt for the first time. It is not wrong if by "get forgiveness" we are referring to a seal or an affirmation of what we already possess through faith in Jesus Christ. In much the same way we "get or receive love" when a parent or spouse says, "*I love you.*" Yet we regard that not as something new, but as a reaffirmation of what was already there. The words assure us of what we already have. They do not, at that particular point in time, give us anything new or anything that we previously lacked. They confirm, seal, remind and assure us.

The alternative would be terrifying in the extreme, for we could never be sure, from one moment to the next, if we truly had complete forgiveness. Then life would be something of a spiritual roulette wheel, where we walked through life hoping against hope that the ball didn't fall when we still carried unforgiven sins. Few, if any, would survive that scenario, that salvation plan.

The true Christian faith leaves no doubt or uncertainty. Every moment you have faith, you also have complete forgiveness. Reject the lie that your forgiveness is incomplete and lacks something that you can, in part, provide. Come instead to the Lord's Table seeking assurance and the strengthening of your faith in the fact that your forgiveness is complete in the sacrifice of our Savior Jesus. When you receive his true body and blood in that heavenly, miraculous way, know that you are receiving the very body and blood that secured your forgiveness 2000 years ago. Know too, without reservation, that this full forgiveness is your own personal possession each and every moment saving faith is found in your heart. God grant to each one of us the wisdom to see through the devil's lie that *Our Forgiveness is Incomplete*, and to rejoice instead in the robe of perfect righteousness with which Jesus Christ our Savior has covered us. Amen.