

Redeemed by Christ

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on March 3, 2019

This morning we are turning to the last sermon in our seven part sermon series on 2 Corinthians. We will be reading from 2 Corinthians, chapter eleven, verses one through fifteen.

2 Corinthians 11:1-15

11 I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! 2 I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. 3 But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. 4 For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough. 5 I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. 6 I may be untrained in speech, but not in knowledge; certainly in every way and in all things we have made this evident to you. 7 Did I commit a sin by humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I proclaimed God's good news to you free of charge? 8 I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. 9 And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for my needs were supplied by the friends who came from Macedonia. So I refrained and will continue to refrain from burdening you in any way. 10 As the truth of Christ is in me, this boast of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. 11 And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! 12 And what I do I will also continue to do, in order to deny an opportunity to those who want an opportunity to be recognized as our equals in what they boast about. 13 For such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. 15 So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness. Their end will match their deeds.

In the book of Isaiah and in the book of Ezekiel we are told the story of the fall of Lucifer, whom we know as Satan. In this story we learn that God created the spiritual world before He created the physical world. In the spiritual world, the pinnacle of creation were the angels, who like us, were given free will. Of all the angels, Lucifer was the greatest.

This was the way things were before Genesis chapter one. Then, at some point, still before Genesis chapter one, Lucifer became proud and decided that he wanted to be God. In his rebellion against God, one third of the angels sided with Lucifer.

This angelic rebellion against God spilled over into the physical world. Thus, the fallen angels, in their attempt to take God's place, began sabotaging His creation. This is the trigger that brought sin into the physical world. In Genesis chapter three, the Serpent, inhabited by Satan, deceived Adam and Eve bringing a deadly curse on the physical world that God had created.

Then, within less than two human life times, which in those days were nearly one thousand years, evil had overtaken the world. Again, at the forefront of this advancement of evil were the fallen angels, whose meddling presence are noted throughout the Scriptures. As Paul writes in Ephesians, our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual wickedness in high places. In 1 Peter 5 we are warned that Satan prowls like a lion seeking people to devour.

In today's Scripture reading, Paul warns the Corinthians that Satan and his fallen angels have not forgotten their war against God, and God's creation; especially human beings, who are now the pinnacle of God's creation. In their desire to destroy all that is good, Paul tells the Corinthians that Satan not only has angels in his army, but, he has also recruited human allies, who also despise God, and who also desire to live life on their own terms in such a way that they are the god at the center of their own universe.

This is the essential power struggle that is described throughout the pages of the Bible. Thus, when Paul describes the great adversity he has endured in life in his letter to the Corinthians he is not talking about a struggle of man versus nature, or Rome versus the Christians, or the bourgeoisie versus the proletariat, or the oppressed versus the oppressors. The battle he describes is a battle between good and evil that is defined in relation to the living God.

Here is how it works. In the Bible, God is good. And everyone who acknowledges God and who rejoices in God's sovereignty, and who expresses gratitude for God's goodness, and who trusts in God for their salvation in this broken world are agents of good. And those who reject God, and deny His sovereignty, and who express contempt for God's world, and who trust in themselves to find happiness in life, on their own terms, apart from God, like Satan and the fallen angels, are agents of evil. It is pretty straight forward.

That being said, we have two blind spots that make it incredibly hard for us to discern what is good and what is true. The first challenge that we face is that the line that separates good and evil runs first and foremost down the center of our own hearts. This reality clouds our discernment.

As an aside, this reality is why Paul reaffirms the words of David in Romans three, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away." This reality is also why we include a prayer of confession each and every Sunday in our worship service and why a prayer of confession is featured prominently in the Lord's Prayer. This reality is also the reason why Jesus told us not to judge others so that we will not be judged. Because the line that separates good and evil runs first and foremost down the center of our own hearts.

A second reality that impedes our ability to discern what is good and what is true is the problem of deceit. This reality, Scripture tells us, was introduced into our world through Satan,

who is known as the “father of lies.” And not only is he a master liar, but, he is also an excellent teacher, who has trained his followers to excel in this skill.

As Paul tells the Corinthians in our reading for today, just as Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, his earthly followers disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness. Or, as Jesus calls them, they are wolves in sheep skin. And why do they do this? Why do they disguise themselves? Why are they determined to deceive the people of God? Because they are jealous. Because they want to be God. And because they can't be God, they seek to destroy everything that God has built. And they seek to destroy the things that matter most to God. That is why Satan attacked Adam and Eve. That is why Satan entered Judas Iscariot in order to betray Jesus. That is why Satan attacked the Apostles throughout the book of Acts, every time the gospel was taken to a new location. That is why Satan places false teachers within the church. Because the church is God's people, and Satan wants to destroy the things that are most important to God.

However, the good news that Paul tells the Corinthians in today's Scripture reading is that God has not abandoned them in their time of need. For just as God intervened in the affairs of humans in the days of Adam and Eve, and in the days of Noah, and in the days of Abraham, and in the days of Moses, and in the days of the Judges, and in the days of the Kings, and in the days of Jesus, Paul tells the Corinthians that God is at work in their midst confronting evil, establishing order, and bringing salvation.

As a matter of fact, this is the central message that Paul tells the Corinthians in his second letter to them. As we have noted throughout this sermon series, the reason Paul wrote 2 Corinthians was to affirm the gospel that he had preached, and to put the church on notice that he was coming to visit them in person, bearing the authority and power of an apostle, for the purpose of confronting the false teachers who were leading the church astray and to put God's house in order.

Furthermore, to ensure that the church in Corinth were able to recognize the work of God in their midst, Paul went to great lengths in today's reading, and in the subsequent passages to help them discern who was truly working on God's behalf and who was not. In today's reading he identifies two major criterion. The two areas Paul told the Corinthians to focus on in order to discern who was the true apostle was their teaching and their character.

Starting with the teaching, Paul told the Corinthians that a true apostle will always affirm the full divinity of Christ, the full humanity of Christ, along with his death and physical resurrection from the dead as the atoning means through which God has redeemed the world. These teachings are critical. And if we look at church history for the first three hundred years, these were the core teachings that were being constantly challenged and which the Church Fathers boldly and victoriously defended.

The second criterion Paul told the Corinthians to focus on as they sought to discern a true apostle from a false teacher was their character. Using himself as an example, Paul highlighted in today's reading how he never took a dime from the Corinthians. All those years he toiled among them, he did it for free, because his sole interest was advancing the gospel of Christ.

If we were to read a little further, finishing off chapter eleven and reading chapter twelve we would hear Paul emphasize humility, sacrifice, and fruit, as three qualities that everyday Christians can use as reliable indicators to discern whose side a given teacher is on. Thus, if an everyday Christian sees a teacher who demonstrates deep humility, whose life bears the marks of great sacrifice, and whose ministry has born great fruit, these are great indications that they are on Christ's side. Likewise, if an everyday Christian sees a teacher who is arrogant and proud, whose life bears the marks of entitlement, and whose ministry hasn't made much of an impact on the lives of others, these are great indications that something is deeply wrong.

These were the things Paul told the Corinthians to focus on until he arrived in their midst. And then, if things hadn't straightened themselves out, Paul assured the Corinthians that he, through the power of the Holy Spirit, would set things right, foiling the works of Satan, and freeing the church to continue in the redemptive paths that God had established for it to follow.

This was the good news that Paul delivered to the Corinthian church in today's reading. And this is the good news that Paul speaks to us today. And the good news is this. God is good. God is sovereign. And God's good plans will not be thwarted by those who have chosen to reject Him. While such individuals, Satan being first and foremost, have done great damage throughout human history, their power is limited and their works will be destroyed. And only God and those who serve Him will remain.

So, we have nothing to fear. Even though we live through trying times, God is with us and we shall overcome. And even though our discernment is clouded because evil still exists within us, and because we are easily deceived, we still have reliable tools through which we may judge what is good and know what is true. However, even when our judgement fails, Christ is still with us, and he will not allow us to fall.

For if we acknowledge that God is good, and if we rejoice in God's sovereignty, and if we expresses gratitude for God's goodness, and if we trust in God for our salvation, believing in His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, whom He sent to die for our sins, and whom He raised from the dead, then we shall be saved. And even the gates of hell shall not be able to lay a finger on us.

This is the good news that Paul encourages us with in today's Scripture reading this morning. And by God's grace, may it strengthen us as we face the challenges of the week ahead. May God use it to bring hope to our hearts and peace to our souls.