

June 22, 2024
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

2 Corinthians 6:1–13

NOW IS THE DAY OF SALVATION.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Every once in a while, someone will ask me why there are so many different Christian denominations in the world with diverse doctrinal teachings when they all claim to teach from the same Bible. Unfortunately, many people don't want to hear the truth but seek out teachers and doctrines that suit their own passions. They turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths and unbelief. (cf: 2 Timothy 4:3–4)

We see an example of this right now as the United States observes “pride month,” the pagan celebration of sexual immorality. The devil has deceived many people to embrace sinful lifestyles that have deadly temporal and eternal consequences. This has brought divisions and factions in the Church, causing denominations to split over what the Bible teaches about human sexuality. But that's only one division. They also split over what the Bible teaches regarding worship styles, women's ordination, communion practice, and a host of other doctrinal issues. So, why are there so many diverse doctrinal teachings when we all use the same Bible? King Solomon would answer:

“... there is nothing new under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

Ever since sin entered the world in the Garden of Eden, the devil has been working overtime to deceive people from the truth in an attempt to steal their faith. But God won't let the devil have his way. He has used and continues to use sinful and imperfect people to advance the Good News of His gracious love and mercy in a sinful and imperfect world. All good things come from God, and because of Him, you are in Christ Jesus, who became for you wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. (cf: 1 Corinthians 1:28–30)

In our epistle reading today, we continue to hear from St. Paul as he writes his second letter to the Christians living in Corinth, and you Christians today. He's been describing how the believer lives in the tension between the “**now**” and the “**not yet**.” Living in the “**now**,” meaning living right **now** as God's redeemed child for the sake of Christ, possessing the forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation. Living in the “**not yet**,” meaning how each day we look forward in eager anticipation for Jesus' second coming on the Last Day when He will judge the living and the dead.

There's nothing new under the sun. In Paul's day, Corinth was a prominent and bustling trade city located in modern-day Greece with a population of almost 700,000. Corinth was a melting

pot of culture, language, and religion famous for its paganism, prostitution, and moral degradation. To this city, God the Holy Spirit called St. Paul to preach the Gospel and plant a Christian Church. (cf: Acts 16:6–10) Unsurprisingly, he was met with verbal and physical resistance. No one likes to hear that their sinful lifestyle is an abomination to God. Yet, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, in weakness, fear, and much trembling, he boldly proclaimed the testimony of God. Among philosophers, the wise, and the commoners, Paul utilized neither lofty speech nor human wisdom. He decided to know nothing among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. (cf: 1 Corinthians 2:1–2)

The Corinthian Christian Church was born but faced the same divisions and turmoil that the Church faces today. There was bickering over moral and doctrinal issues that caused divisions in the leadership. Factions were flaunting their wisdom and Christian liberty in the face of others who were scandalized by their actions. (cf: 1 Corinthians 3:1–23) Pagan practices and the immoral sexual ethics of the city continually infiltrated the Church. (cf: 1 Corinthians 6:12–20) There were improper practices and abuses concerning the Lord’s Supper, divisions because of worship practice and the role of women in the Church, and even difficulty in accepting the resurrection of the body. (cf: 1 Corinthians 11:17–22, 14:26–40, 15:12–19)

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul rebukes their divisions and calls out their sin, selfishness, foolish human wisdom, immorality, idolatry, and spiritual pride. But in his second letter, he brings them the comfort and good news they need. He begins the letter writing:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction.” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4)

In our text for today, Paul is pleading with the Corinthians not to receive the **grace** of God in vain. (cf: 2 Corinthians 6:1) The word **grace** in our text means the undeserved forgiveness, love, and mercy that comes as a gift from God, because of Christ crucified for sinners. It’s what Paul has been preaching all along to the Corinthians, and for those who have heard and believed, it’s a gift they possess in the “**now**.” And Paul wants God’s grace to come to full fruitfulness **in** them and **for** them. He wants each and every one of them to believe the Good News that Christ was crucified and died for them – individually, that Christ rose from the dead for each one of them – individually, that Christ reconciled each one of them – individually with God the Father, and now Jesus has given them the ministry of reconciliation where God draws sinful people to Himself through the proclamation of the Gospel. (cf: 2 Corinthians 5:18–21) Refusing to be reconciled with God and their neighbor puts them in real danger of eternal damnation.

The problem is that the Christian in Corinth suffer from a form of spiritual heart disease that entered the world in the Garden of Eden that causes sinfulness, selfishness, and stubbornness. Even though they’ve heard the Gospel Good News of Christ crucified for sinners, they’ve puffed themselves up and shut God out. Immediately prior to our text, Paul pleads with them to:

“... be reconciled to God.” (2 Corinthians 5:20)

And immediately following our text he pleads with them, saying:

“Make room in your hearts for us.” (2 Corinthians 7:2)

What about the Church today? There is nothing new under the sun. How often has your heart and mine been puffed up and shut God out? Like the Corinthians, we're ancestors of Adam and Eve. We all share the same spiritual heart disease that causes sinfulness, selfishness, and stubbornness. How often do you fail to love your neighbor as yourself? Sure. Your schedule is overbooked. The kiddos need to be fed, bathed, and tucked into bed. The dishes and laundry need to be done. The garbage needs to be taken out and the lawn needs mown – among a myriad of other household duties and repairs. But maybe you think if you put off your responsibilities, someone else will step up and carry your load. You believe that if you bury your head in your own schedule and details, you won't have to care for the orphans and widows and the truly needy of the world. (cf: James 1:27) It's all evidence of your spiritual heart disease.

Of course, there are other reasons your heart might be damaged... the things others have done to you... the pain and suffering caused by others whom you trusted. Maybe it's division between you and another person in this church that you've silently carried around for far too long. Perhaps you're still grieving the death of a loved one and can't understand why God would allow them to be taken so soon. Whatever your affliction and suffering is – whether you are the victim, or your wound was self-inflicted – you and I and all mankind suffer from spiritual heart disease. Like the Corinthians, we puff ourselves up and shut God out. We fail to love God and our neighbor as we should.

The Good News is - the Corinthians were not left to deal with their spiritual heart disease on their own, and neither are you. The Corinthians were not left waiting for a future day when they would have access to grace, help, and salvation. No. Paul reminds them of God's promise of restoration to Israel by His prophet Isaiah, saying:

"In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." (2 Corinthians 6:2a; cf: Isaiah 49:8)

He continues proclaiming to them the Good News, saying:

"Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Corinthians 6:2;)

They no longer have to carry around their burdens. They no longer need to carry their sin, their guilt, their shame, or the wrong done to them. The Corinthians' damaged hearts are made whole in Christ Jesus. Just as Paul writes in the previous chapter:

"... if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

The Christians in Corinth are new creations. A new and clean heart has been created within them. Salvation, help, and grace are all theirs because of Jesus. And so, too, is it with you! As a baptized believer in Christ – you, too, are a new creation in Christ. While you were still puffed up and shutting God out, Christ Jesus came and died for you. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome:

"For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life."
(Romans 5:10)

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

“Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” (2 Corinthians 6:2)

Christ Jesus, the sinless Son of God became man and took on your sin. He stretched His arms out on the cross and died for every one of your sins: your sins of selfishness and stubbornness, your sins of not loving God and your neighbor as you should. He took on all your sin, your suffering, and all your spiritual heart disease and, in exchange, gave you His righteousness, forgiveness, and a clean heart. Christ didn't leave you on your own to heal and save yourself. No. In Baptism you were united with Christ, granted God's undeserved forgiveness, love, and mercy for the sake of Christ Jesus' innocent suffering, death, and resurrection on your behalf. You are now healed of every affliction by our Lord Jesus.

It's the tension of how the believer lives in the “***now***” and the “***not yet***.” Living in the “***now***,” there's no waiting or hoops to jump through. On this very day, you have received God's favor by hearing His Gospel Good News. You have heard that Christ was crucified for you – individually! By the authority of Christ you have been absolved of your sins. Come to this altar where you'll receive His body and blood for your forgiveness, life, and salvation.

It is true that living in the “***now***,” you and I will still suffer. God's people will be afflicted in every way by the many hardships Paul names in our text: calamities, beatings, dishonor, and slander to name a few. You'll suffer the discomfort of conflict, the misery of broken relationships, and the agony of grief. You and I will struggle with imperfect hearts, but the struggle will not last forever. You do not receive the grace of God in vain. Every day you receive grace upon grace from God in all its fullness. He has given you the Holy Spirit to enable you to flee from your sinful desires and temptations – while at the same time – serving and loving others just as God in Christ serves and loves you. God has always used and continues to use sinful and imperfect people to advance the Good News of His gracious love and mercy in a sinful and imperfect world.

That's living in the “***now***.” Living in the “***not yet***,” you baptized believer, live looking forward in eager anticipation for Jesus' second coming on the Last Day when He will judge the living and the dead. For just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, you too, will rise from your grave and walk in the newness of life when He returns on the Last Day.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.