

Grow in Righteousness
1. For Christ's Sake, Stop Sinning
Romans 10:8-13

In my last church the woman who was in charge of the acolyte program heard of a boy who might be interested in being an acolyte. She asked him, and, to our joy, he said yes. The time for him to acolyte came during the Lenten season. Neither he nor his mother had ever been very active in church, but they were very faithful in attendance during that Lenten season. On his last Sunday to acolyte I was talking to her and telling her how impressed I was with their faithfulness during this time. I said that I hoped they would continue to participate in church. She said that she didn't think they would be attending again. When I asked her why, she said, "Because you sing such sad songs and talk about sin so much." That's when I realized that Lent might not be the best time to introduce people to church.

Because of her lack of experience in the church she didn't know that during the Lenten Season we do talk a lot about Christ dying on the cross for our sins. That means we have to talk about sin. And, yes, we will sing a lot of songs about the Cross and often those songs are sad.

So, I'm giving you fair warning. During the next few weeks I will be talking about sin a lot. And we will be singing a lot of songs about the Cross. If you are one of those folks who only want to talk about happy things, you might want to wait and come back on Easter. You will be one of many. It's no accident that so many people only come to church on Easter. That's a very happy celebration.

But, you know, the people who haven't been through Lent can't really appreciate Easter because they don't know how much Easter cost. Let me illustrate. You see this tie? What do you think about it? It's a pretty tie, isn't it? Well, let me tell you a little something about this tie. You won't see this tie very often. I wear it once every couple of years. Becky gave me this tie for my birthday over thirty years ago. I like this tie, because it's a man's tie. I know that sounds strange, but most of the ties men wear were given to them by women. That's why so many men's ties are bright and bold with lots of flowers and such. We men wear them because, after all, we only wear ties to please the women anyway. What do we care what they look like? But if men were to pick out a tie, it would look like this one, dignified, subtle, small gold geometric patterns on a black background. It has this "CM" on the bottom. I think that stands for "costs more." It did cost a lot. I happen to know how much it cost, because I had seen it on display in the store window. In today's dollars it cost about \$125. Now, some of you guys may be used to spending \$125 for a tie, but not this preacher. When I unwrapped it, I was tempted to have it framed and hung on my office wall. I appreciate this tie for many reasons. One reason is that I know how much

it cost. And I'll bet that you appreciate this tie a little more now that you know how much it cost

The same thing is true of eternal life. On Easter, you can't really appreciate the resurrection and eternal life until you what they cost. During Lent we think about the price Christ paid for our salvation and that he had to pay that price because of our sins. We have eternal life because Christ suffered and died for us.

We also remind ourselves that Christ continues to suffer because of our sins. We continue to cause him great heartache and sadness, because he knows how much misery and sorrow we cause ourselves and one another because of our sins. And he knows how much better our lives would be if we would just stop sinning.

Christ shares our guilt. One man tells that when he was a boy he was pretty rowdy and a bit of a trouble-maker. One day he and another boy found a way into the local school, and they proceeded to trash the school. They got caught in the act. They had to go before the court for a hearing to determine their punishment. The other boy's father was so embarrassed by what his boy had done that he didn't even show up for the hearing. But this boy's father came and sat beside him. When the judge asked him for his plea, his father stood with him and said, "My son and I plead guilty." He was so grateful to his father that at that moment, he says, he decided never again to do anything to hurt his father.

When Jesus went to the cross for our sins, he was standing up with us before the judge and saying, "We plead guilty."

So, the message during Lent is "For Christ's sake, stop sinning."

And when we say, "For Christ's sake," we mean, "For Christ's sake." We are not saying, "Quit sinning so that you can be saved." You have already been saved. Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. You don't have to quit sinning to win God's love. God loves us from our earliest moments. You don't have to quit sinning to avoid God's wrath. God has forgiven us for Christ's sake.

I think that needs to be stressed throughout Lent. We are not trying to make you feel guilty when we talk about your sins. We are not trying to frighten you with threats of judgment and condemnation.

We are sinners. Yes, we are. Not only do we sin, but we are sinful.

The amazing thing is that we don't have to be ashamed to admit we are sinful. God does not judge us or condemn us. In Christ God has offered us pardon and forgiveness. It is ours, if we will just accept it.

So, why should we stop sinning if we are forgiven? We want to stop sinning for Christ's sake. We want to stop sinning out of love and gratitude to the one who suffered and died for our salvation.

During Lent we remind ourselves of our desire to live a righteous life. We are not trying to live a righteous life because of what we can get out of it, although in many ways a righteous life is much happier and more fulfilling than a sinful life. We want to live a righteous life out of gratitude for the life we have received.

We want to stop sinning because we owe it to Christ to stop sinning.

Let me tell you about when I stopped speeding. When I was young, I drove fast. When I got my first job, I bought a Pontiac Firebird, with a 400 cubic inch motor. The speedometer went to 160. One time I took it to 120, and the tachometer was only about half way to red. That means the engine could easily have handled 160. That car was low and wide and handled curves and corners as if they weren't even there.

Well, the week before Becky and I were married, I was taking her home for the wedding. I was doing about 90 on a little county road. Becky said something about an unusual cloud. I looked up at the cloud. When I looked down, I saw a road sign flash by saying 45 mile an hour curve ahead. I immediately hit the brakes, but it was too late. My wheels went off the right side of the road. I made the mistake so many people make in that situation. I tried to jerk the car back on the road. We went into a spin. It seemed like we spun for half an hour. As that car spun, the dust covered us. We couldn't see a thing. I was pretty certain we were going to die. But when the dust settled, that Firebird was sitting backwards on the other side of the road, backed up on a little tree that had stopped us very gently. Other than some bruises from hitting our heads against the windows, we weren't hurt at all.

All four tires were pulled on the rims. Becky had to call her father to come help us pull those wheels off and get them fixed. As I waited for her father to come, I tried to imagine his reaction. He is a big, strong man, champion boxer in the Navy, was the starting tight end for Sam Houston State during his college days. He was a school superintendent. He is not a man to trifle with. I didn't think he would get physical, but at the least I expected a severe tongue lashing. I wondered if he would decide I was too irresponsible to marry his daughter. When he arrived, he walked around the car and looked at the wheels. He looked at me and said, "You know, you could have killed her." That was all he said. But that was enough.

Since that day I no longer drive fast. I owe it to my wife and my family not to drive fast. I owe it to other people on the road not to drive fast. I owe it to God not to drive fast. God gave me a second chance that day, and I don't intend to waste it. And I owe it to my father-in-law not to drive fast. He also gave me a second chance that day. In spite of my irresponsibility that day he entrusted his daughter to me a few days later. I don't want to disappoint him. I owe him.

That's why we try so hard to live righteous lives. We owe it to Christ. If you have been confronted by the reality of sin in your life, you realized that you don't deserve the good life you have received, much less eternal life. We deserve judgment. Instead, Christ died for our salvation. We don't want to let him down. We owe it to him to do the best we can with the life we have been given. That's why we are trying to be as righteous as we can be. We owe it to Christ.

So, during these Forty Days I'll be talking about our sinfulness, and we'll be singing songs about the cross. But it will be done in a spirit of gratitude to the one who died for us. On Easter you will discover new heights of joy as we celebrate the gift of Eternal Life given to us so graciously and so freely, if you are willing to stick with us through Lent.

Dr. Wesley Welborn
Senior Pastor