

"Holy Absolution: Deliverance from Judgment"

John 12:46-50

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Midweek - Advent 2

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Boise, Idaho

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The Word of the Lord from John 12:

"I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness. "And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him -- the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. "For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. "And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak." (John 12:46-50)

This is the Word of the Lord.

I. The Fear of Judgment

You've done something wrong. You know it. We all have. Here are the scenarios. Maybe you got caught, served your punishment and made things right-done deal. Maybe it turned out to be no big thing, something everybody does; at least that's what everybody said, and you felt better afterwards because your big mistake was only a little thing after all. Or maybe you never got caught, and you're not going to: the winds of time have erased the tracks and you got away with that one.

So how come it still bothers you?

In human terms, you can explain away the nagging regret. Maybe you thought you were a better person than that. Maybe you're thinking about loss of reputation-maybe the shame and embarrassment. And all that might be in play, but there's something bigger and deeper at work: it's your conscience. Your conscience isn't letting go, and that's a big deal. Why? Because Romans 2:15 says that your conscience is based upon God's Law. Therefore, the Law is telling you this: even if everyone else says that it's okay, you've still got the Lawmaker to contend with. Even if everyone else excuses it, God doesn't. Even if no one else knows, He knows. And He's in a position to do something about it-and He will do something about it. Judgment Day is coming, and there's no way around that.

What to do? Old Adam has a few suggestions-and they're so attractive and natural that you buy into them before you realize. It doesn't pay to 'fess up. That's not what people do. Our whole justice system is based upon plea bargaining: never admit guilt, bluff it out or try at least for a lesser charge...but only a fool admits he's actually done wrong.

No, Old Adam hates confessing sins and admitting wrong, so you've got a few options left. Live

with it: you made a mistake, so live and learn. You can't turn back the clock and fix the past, so just keep on going. Eventually, the pain and shame will fade away and you might even forget. If this is an attractive option, bear in mind that it's built on the idea that God forgets things at least as fast as you do. Your sinful nature wants you to forget that God remembers. But God remembers, and Judgment Day is coming.

So if living with it doesn't work, try rationalizing it. God isn't going to hold this sin against you because, well, fill in the blank. Everybody's doing it. Times have changed. It was the best decision in a bad situation. The rationalizations are many, but they all get stopped by the Law that sin is sin. If everybody's doing it, then everybody's guilty. If times have changed, God and His Law remain forever. The best decision in a bad situation may still be a bad decision. Rationalizing may make you feel better, but it doesn't make you any less guilty. Your sin is still bound to you, and Judgment Day is coming.

If rationalizing doesn't work, Old Adam might try a different trick: persist in the sin. Continue in it in order to prove to whoever that it isn't bad, isn't wrong, and that you're not ashamed. True, you may feel better about a sin if you keep doing it again and again, but this doesn't make the sin any better. Rather, it only means that your conscience has been blunted. You've succeeded in hardening your heart. You're still guilty, but you just don't feel guilty. And Judgment Day is coming.

Old Adam will give you a lot of options for dealing with sin and guilt. But seeing as how Old Adam is your old sinful nature, it's not exactly interested in getting rid of itself. Therefore, the Lord warns in I John, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (I Jn. 1:8). And, "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us" (I Jn. 1:10). This isn't helping: in trying to get over your sin, now you're calling God a liar.

No matter what Old Adam suggests, it can't take away your sin or guilt-nor does it want to. Therefore, put away Old Adam and hear the Word of the Lord; for I John also declares, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I Jn. 1:9). Far from pounding you for confessing your sin, the Lord promises forgiveness instead. When you hear the Holy Absolution, your sins are gone-your guilt is taken away.

Really? Is this true even for you? Even after what you've done? Can you be sure of forgiveness before Judgment Day? Oh, yes: you can know for sure.

II. Holy Absolution

Have you pondered the gift that is given in Holy Absolution? The truth that lies behind those words? Here it is in brief: The wages of sin is death. Those who sin-and that is all mankind, including you and me-face God's judgment and a sentence of eternal death. Sin earns judgment, and there's no way around it: somebody's got to pay. And it only makes sense that if you do the crime, you do the eternal time.

The wages of sin is certain, and so is the identity of the Judge. Scripture identifies the Judge as Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats: the righteous will receive the kingdom of heaven, and the unrighteous will be sentenced to hell.

The news that Jesus is the Judge is bad news to the unbeliever. After all, mankind scourged and crucified Him; now He's risen from the dead, and man's treatment of Him would seem to give Him extra motivation to be zealous in condemning people. But this is completely the wrong idea, and this is why it is most fitting to examine Absolution during the Advent season.

Here is the Good News that leads to your pardon and forgiveness. Before He comes to judge all nations, Jesus Christ has already come. He became flesh and was born at Christmas-He was made man. However, He did not become man to see if man would accept Him as Lord; He already knew that man would reject Him and put Him to death. Jesus became man, flesh and blood like you and me, so that He might shed His blood and offer His body in our place, for our sin. Now, note what happened just before His crucifixion-at His trial before Pontius Pilate. Before Pilate sentenced Him to death, he pronounced Him innocent three times. He sentenced Jesus to death after finding no guilt in Him! Furthermore, the people called for His crucifixion because He was the Son of God. Why was Jesus crucified by man? Because He was not guilty. Now, why was Jesus condemned by His Father? To die for the guilt that wasn't His.

Now Jesus is risen again; and again, we insist from Scripture that He is not coming back to settle the score for His scourging and cross. He is coming back with healing in His wings. You see, here's the thing. Your Savior is not a Judge who seeks the death of as many as possible. Instead, so much does He desire to pardon you for your sin that He already sentenced Himself with your sentence. He sentenced Himself to your death, paid the price for your sin. And because He's suffered the sentence and the price is paid, you don't have to pay it again. How do you know this is true? Because He doesn't keep you in suspense until Judgment Day. Instead, even now, He declares you "not guilty." He tells you the verdict you will hear on Judgment Day, and He does it with these words: "I forgive you all of your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

It might be the pastor's lips moving, but he's not the one forgiving you. He stands in the stead and by the command of Christ; in other words, he is simply delivering to you the message of your Savior and Judge. In Holy Absolution, the Judge renders His verdict of you: He says, "I've borne your guilt and suffered your death sentence. Your guilt is gone and your sentence is served. I declare you 'not guilty.'" And if Jesus declares you "not guilty," the verdict stands. He is the supreme court Justice. The devil has no further appeal to accuse you. You're not guilty now and forever.

Hear again our Lord's Word from John 12: I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him-the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. (Jn. 12:47b-48). Do you see how all-encompassing this sacrifice of Jesus is? He has died to declare the world not guilty. In fact, there is only one way that anyone can be lost: it is to say, "I don't want Jesus to take away my guilt. I'll keep my sin for myself, and I'll suffer the sentence myself." That's what unbelief, unrepentance is. Unbelievers are lost because they refuse the Judge's sacrifice and verdict of innocence for them.

So, when your conscience troubles you, give thanks to God that He leaves you sensitive to His Law and your need for forgiveness. Hear the Absolution and know that the Judge declares you "not guilty"-forgiven for all of your sins. And if you still remain troubled hearing that general Absolution, then go see your pastor for private Confession and Absolution. There, in private Absolution, the pastor can show you in Scripture that Christ has died for the specific sins that trouble you. This office is protected by a seal of confidentiality; for if the Lord no longer remembers your sin, how can it be recalled?

And finally, dear friends, rejoice in this: no matter how valuable your conscience is, God's Word is more sure. If you are still troubled after Absolution with pangs of conscience, do not doubt the Lord's Word, but trust that it is more certain than what you feel. You can be sure of God's favor and pardon this day, because in Holy Absolution the Lord declares the eternal verdict to you: "Judgment Day is coming, but already I declare you 'not guilty' for my sake; because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen