

2 Corinthians 5:21
Good Friday Tenebrae
April 3, 2026

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

Our text for meditation this evening, St Paul writes to the Corinthians that “He who knew no sin became sin for us, that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We spent much time in the Lenten midweek season focusing on slaying the Old Adam and training up the New Adam – an entire sermon series on *sanctification* and the baptismal life of the fruit of the Spirit. And – whether you were able to take part in the midweek series – working on sanctification is a *good* exercise, and we *should* engage in such exercise not only regularly, but daily – not only in meditation, but in practice... not only in thought and word, but also in deed and truth.

However, the further someone goes in such an exercise and meditation, the more he becomes susceptible to one of two extremes: he can either become proud and boastful of how strong he believes he has become, how much he has grown, how much spiritual weight he can lift... OR he can become weary, tired, exhausted, feeling weaker than ever before because he constantly feels the weight of the good and holy Law and, in his heart of hearts, he knows he is not successfully measuring up as he ought.

And the reason either extreme occurs is because the Christian is subtly, subconsciously co-mingling sanctification (holy living) with justification (holy declaration – not guilty before God); he is forgetting that sanctification flows from justification, and he instead begins to see his sanctification as a (not “the,” but “a”... a *supporting*) cause of his justification.

So, to safeguard ourselves from the dangers of either extreme, or even to be pulled by the shepherd’s crook back from being entangled in either extreme, we must be refocused on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. For there at the foot of the cross, the **proud** must see plainly their foolishness in thinking they had measured up... for He is their hanging for *their* sins! And there at the foot of the cross, the **weary and weak** see their comfort and joy, for there He is hanging *for* their sins! And both proud and weak may meditate on these words, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us!”

Yes, whether you are puffed up or weak, whether proud at heart or broken in spirit, Christ crucified changes everything; and we can forever remain at the foot of the cross with clarity of what His substitution means for us.

But we sinners find it more believable that God would make us contribute to our salvation (even if that contribution is simply our great mourning and weeping at the meditation on the death of Christ!) than that God would save us solely by the work of His

Messiah. And, because we have a hard time removing our focus from ourselves, we manage to – on the one hand – rejoice that Christ died for me, and – on the other hand – interpret that to mean that Christ died as our template, our example, our prototype. And the **proud** will then thank God for their own effort and ability to choose Jesus, follow Him with great faith, even die righteously like Christ... or the **weak and exhausted and burdened in conscience** will then fear God's wrath for they cannot even *die* like their example, can't even copy the righteousness of their template, can't even suffer with their prototype, can't even follow Him with great faith, know in their heart they have not *always* chosen His will over their own.

But, to humble the proud, and to comfort the meek, the Scriptures are abundantly clear – Christ crucified is no mere example, template, or enabler. Nor did He go to the cross to earn your tears. He is our substitute, our replacement, our scapegoat... so that the **proud** cannot die for themselves, and the **meek** need not die for themselves.

How does St Paul say it again, “He who knew no sin became sin *for us*.” Elsewhere, Paul says to these same Corinthians, “of first importance... that Christ died for our sins.” ... a truth that reverberates throughout Scripture, as the prophets also had earlier prophesied of the Christ, “He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities.” In the face of such a universal

salvation, the **proud** cannot believe themselves *exempt*; and the **meek** need not fear themselves *left out*.

Indeed, there can be no mistaking that Christ is there on that cross for us all – proud and meek alike, those who desire Him to be there, those who don't – He's there in our stead, as our substitute... and our text from 2 Corinthians speaks perhaps most profoundly about this great truth of the Gospel and our salvation, this truth called “the great exchange” – in which Christ took on all our sin and our eternal death, and – in exchange – he gifted us all his righteousness and his eternal life.

This breathtaking truth of “the great exchange”, the apostle shared not only with the Corinthians but also with the Galatians. To the latter, Paul writes, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us.” There it is again – the great exchange – Christ *takes* the curse that is ours and *gifts* us the blessing that is His. And what is true in the universal atonement when Christ died “for *us*” is individually gifted when Christ sacramentally pours it out “for *you*”... taking away your sins of death and gifting you the blood rich with his life.

This beautiful treasure is ours to safeguard and defend and wrestle to protect and cherish until that day that we, by sight, share not only in his sacrificial death but in his eternal life.

Now, the one who has wrestled in the baptismal life to slay the Old Man and train up the New Man, the one who rightly has

spent much time with sanctification may still wrongly conflate his sanctification with his justification and may say, “Yes, but as I have wrestled, there is less sin to die for. There is less for Christ to pay on my behalf than for him to pay on behalf of my neighbor. I need this great exchange less than my neighbor does.” Jesus even foreknows this thought in the heart of proud sinners, and so he tells the parable of the pharisee who prayed, “Thank you, God, that you did not make me like this tax collector.” And again, Jesus elsewhere asked, “Who will be more grateful – the one who has been forgiven much, or the one (who believes he has been) forgiven little?”

But, where there may be more or less progress in sanctification, there is no such gradation in justification. In justification, there is no ‘gray area’, if you will – it’s all or nothing; there is only black-and-white; there is only yes or no; thumb up or thumb down. There is only *perfectly just and in unity with God*, and there’s *everything else* that deserves no standing before the holy God. If we were to be judged by our sanctification, the one who believes he is 90% up the hill of sanctification would be just as totally condemned by the Law as the one who is supposedly only 10% up the hill of sanctification. And since, this side of heaven, “no one is righteous; no not one. All fall short of the glory of God”, then the great exchange is equally needed by us all. And the great exchange is equally good news for us all – The gospel enfleshed in the body of Jesus Christ for us all.

Isn't that how **St Peter** says it when he says of this Jesus: "He Himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree." Notice those two points of emphasis – first, "our sins"... there's no distinction: all have sinned and fall short; second, "in his own body" – the gospel enfleshed in the body of Jesus Christ. He is our justification and our righteousness and, in the great exchange, he gave us all that should be praised regarding Him and took upon himself and bore the weight of and was forsaken for and atoned for all that should be condemned regarding us... he took it all: our sloth, our anger, our gluttony and sexual sins, our greed, our envy – he paid for it all... so that there is now no condemnation for all who are in Christ Jesus.

And that helps us hear the next phrase of our life in Christ rightly. Go back to our text from Paul's words to the Corinthians: "He who knew no sin became sin for us, that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." Notice the second half of that statement: "... that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." Now, it may be easy to focus on *trying* to "become the righteousness of God" (sanctification and holy living gradually and quietly morphing into our justification). But, all importantly, that sanctification is defined by its antecedent: "In Him." Only and always "in Him." For all who are *in Christ Jesus*, there is no condemnation, so that to *hide* in Him is to be declared freely "the righteous of God." And to *live* in Him is to live, neither with a self-righteous conscience nor a self-

condemned conscience, but with a free and clear conscience that loves the sanctified life of the fruit of the Spirit.

Notice how St Peter, in the very same way as St Paul, says of our *justification* in Jesus, “He Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree,” and then he continues with *sanctification*: “that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness – ‘by whose stripes we are healed.’” Did you hear that: “we might live for righteousness” – that’s not to live to *achieve* our righteousness, or to live for our own *competitive scoring* of righteousness, but it is to live for Christ... He who is our righteousness... Isn’t that how Peter’s words continue: “that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness – by whose stripes we are healed” ... “by *whose* stripes”, Christ’s stripes, He is our righteousness... we might live for Him, our righteousness, by whose stripes we are healed... healed: redeemed! Justified! Now being sanctified, one day to be glorified! – but always to live *in* Him and follow Him and rejoice in Him, as the apostle says, “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body (sanctification), I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.” (Right back to justification!)

Christ loved you and He gave Himself up for you... or, as He himself said it, “I am the Good Shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. No one takes my life from me; I lay it down of my own accord, and I take it up again.”

Yes, of His own accord, He justified you... He gifted you the great exchange... that divine transaction you behold every time you look on that icon of your salvation, emblazoned in your sight and upon your forehead and in your heart. And that great exchange He gifted to you, He does not now leave you to *safeguard for yourself*, but He remains that Noble Shepherd of your salvation – as St Peter says it – “For you were like sheep going astray, but you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

That is just as much of a sanctification truth as a justification truth, isn't it? For a shepherd is not about *purchasing* sheep, but about *keeping* the sheep. And this Good Shepherd is not merely about *laying down his life* for the sheep, but about *feeding His life* to His sheep... yes, sacramentally teaching and feeding His sheep... His holy sacrifice being poured out in holy gifts forgiving and strengthening you for holy living... the benefits of that great exchange.

Thus, in justification (“Christ **for** us”) and in sanctification (“Christ **in** us”) there remains forever one source of comfort, of clear conscience, of pure joy – there remains one great exchange – one Christ and Him crucified... who became sin for us, became the curse for us, so that in Him we may become the righteousness of God.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son

And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
April 3, 2026