

Sermon for Sat./Sun. Sept. 20 & 21, 2008

Lessons: Isaiah 55:6-9 - God's thoughts are not our thoughts; Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30 - For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain; Matthew 20:1-16 - Jesus' parable of the generous master of the house to laborers in the vineyard.

Intro: I don't know about you, but right now, I don't really want to die. Oh, don't get me wrong, I want to go to heaven. As we just sang for our children's message, *Heaven is a wonderful place filled with glory and grace. I'm gonna see my Savior's face, heaven is a wonderful place.* I know this because of the 'generosity' of God's grace to me, a sinner. That's Jesus' parallel in His parable from our Gospel lesson found in Matt. 20, of the master of the house hiring laborers for his vineyard, all for the same pay, all by grace. That 'last one' in Jesus' parable is me, a sinner, who will be made first by the generous grace of God in heaven. 'For God's thoughts aren't my thoughts' praise God! And 'God's ways aren't my ways' praise the Lord! For Jesus' sake and for Jesus', God's grace personified, sake alone heaven is a wonderful place prepared for me and you.

But, I don't want to die, mainly for two reasons: first of all, my life in this world is too good; I have a beautiful and wonderful wife, I have two awesome daughters and a great son-in-law. I'm soon to be a Grandpa. In fact, Rachel has it all figured out that Fridays will be Grandpa's day-care day. I have a super extended family and Christian friends in many of you. I have a beautiful home and gardens. I have my pickup truck and my dog, Deuce. What more could a man need or want? By the grace of God, I have it all. And besides, like the Apostle Paul, being a teacher and pastor in the church means 'fruitful labor for me'. As my pickup truck rear window sticker says: *Life is good!* So, I don't want to die, though I want to go to heaven.

The second reason I don't want to die is because I don't want to suffer. I don't want the disease. I don't want the hospital and hospice beds. I don't want the old age complications of alzheimers, of dementia, of wheel chairs, of nursing assistants feeding and bathing me. I don't want the pain. I don't want the loneliness, nor any of the trials and tribulations associated with death and dying.

I like to listen to country music, and one of my all time favorite singers is Kenny Chesney. He has the same taste in clothes as I do... sleeveless shirts, shorts, baseball caps and cowboy hats -- to the frustration of my wife. I like his attitude of life: "Kick back on the beach," and "have a beer in Mexico" (or Minnesota, for that matter). "She [my wife] thinks my tractor's (or at least my lawnmower) sexy." I heard a new song of Kenny Chesney's the other day on the radio entitled; 'Everybody wants to go to heaven, get their wings and fly around, everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to go now'. For me, Kenny Chesney's song is so true. I want to go to that 'wonderful place filled with glory and grace. I want to see me Savior's face,' but I don't want to suffer and die.

And that's what I want to talk to you about a little bit today based on our highlighted verse of Philippians 1:21:

'FOR ME TO LIVE IS CHRIST, AND TO DIE IS GAIN'.

I

The Apostle Paul actually wrote those words while he was under house arrest, imprisonment, in Rome. It's Paul's first of two Roman imprisonments. The second imprisonment would lead to his execution. Paul has been imprisoned, we're told, 'for Christ', that is, for preaching and teaching that Jesus Christ is Lord. In 1st Century Imperial Rome, the Caesars were considered to be lord, representative's of the gods of Mt. Olympus. To preach and teach something other than Caesar as lord was considered treason, or at the very least, political suicide.

Well, the Apostle Paul wasn't much into being 'politically correct', and he boldly and confidently preached and taught that 'JESUS alone IS LORD'! Not a political lord, not a new Caesar, and not simply a representative of the gods of Mt. Olympus, but that Jesus is OUR Lord God! Like Paul, we continue to boldly and confidently confess in our catechism: 'I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, **is my Lord**. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, death and from the power of the devil'. Jesus is our Lord God who came to this planet earth, to substitute Himself in our place upon the cross. Jesus is our Lord God who, out of the generosity of His grace, redeemed us and exchanged our sinful condition in His sight for His righteousness, innocence and blessedness. JESUS IS LORD! And because of that fact alone, I will be welcomed, as you will be, 'through faith' into heaven when I die. Because, whether I want to or not, it's not an option you and I have. All of us will die, and in the process, we will suffer. How true God's Word is: 'God's ways are not my ways, God's thoughts are not my thoughts'. Suffering and death are the consequences and the reality of our sin. Romans 6 says 'the wages of sin is death'. A wage is what you earn, like the laborers in the vineyard, except, in their case, they didn't get what they earned. They all generously and equally received God's unearnable grace. Have you ever lied or even just stretched the truth a little bit? Then you'll suffer and die. Have you ever gossiped or talked about another person behind their back? Then you'll suffer and die. Have ever you coveted, that is, been discontented, even when life is good? Then you'll suffer and die. Have you ever disrespected anyone in authority? Then you'll suffer and die. Have you neglected God's Word or failed to put Jesus as the Lord of your life? Have you cursed, swore, or even been superstitious? Then you'll suffer and die. James ch. 4 says, "Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins," So, whether I want to or not, no matter if my pickup truck rear window affirms that 'Life is good'. I will die, and so will all of you, as the wage of our sin. The Apostle Paul did. He was eventually beheaded by the Imperial Guard of Caesar, for preaching and teaching our Christian faith -- JESUS IS LORD.

II

But, it's in these realities of life and death that Paul was inspired by the Spirit of Jesus Christ to write the words of Philippians 1: 21, "**FOR ME TO LIVE IS CHRIST, AND TO DIE IS GAIN.**"

We can affirm the same Word of God in our lives and deaths by the same grace of God which confesses: JESUS IS LORD! Life IS good! 'To live is Christ' means to use the time, opportunities and people God has graciously given in our lives to share the love of Jesus. Even while in prison among the Imperial Guard, Paul shared the love of Jesus. So

we are told, others became 'much more bold to speak God's Word without fear'. That's also our purpose in our blessed and good lives, to share Jesus Christ with others; our spouses, our children, our grandchildren, our family, our friends, our enemies for that matter. Love them out of their animosity towards you. God has loved you. 'Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ'. As Paul writes to the Philippians 'that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel'. That's simply being the Holy Christian Church Immanuel Lutheran, Plainview. As a matter of fact, 'side by side' is the meaning of the word 'synod', as in the Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod. That's what really gives my pick up truck rear window sticker it's meaning; LIFE IS GOOD!

It's the unity of spirit, the one mind, the striving side by side, the faith of the gospel -- the good news that Jesus is the Lord of our life, by the generous grace of God, which helps us face and confront the reality of suffering and death, whether we want to suffer and die or not. I don't want to die of a heart attack or stroke. I don't want to die of cancer or the effects of it's treatments. I don't want to die of some neurological disease. I don't want to die in a vehicular accident. I don't want to die of all the complications of old age. I don't want to suffer through these things any more than the Apostle Paul really wanted his head to be sliced off. But, just as in the grace of God 'as the heavens are higher than the earth', 'as God's ways and God's thoughts higher than my thoughts,' we face life with all it's blessings and sufferings, and we face the reality of death with it's sufferings and blessings. Also, because JESUS IS LORD, our Lord God over sin, over death, over hell itself. As our catechism continues to confess 'All this our Lord did that I should be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him' by serving others.

III. The reality and the impact of our verse Philippians 1:21 was put to the test with our brother in Christ, Bud Petersen. Remember Bud? With his cowboy boots, his love of country music, he would loan his speakers for the outdoor service in summers past, he recorded music and the Christmas story for our live nativity, he helped build our stewardship altar a few years ago, he made me this ships model before he died. Bud, his wife Lougene and their daughters Bonnie and Beverly were faced with some very, very difficult decisions about Bud's health, a few years ago. There's a whole lot more to the story that I don't have time to share. But, I remember meeting at St. Mary's hospital around this big conference table with all these doctors, nurses, therapists, clinicians -- everyone sharing their input about Bud's situation. Then the family and I went to a little chapel room on the top floor of the Mary Bhry building of St. Mary's. We talked, prayed and cried, and shared God's Word from Philippians 1:21, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." It's that Word of God which led Bud, Lougene, Bonnie and Beverly to confidently affirm that Jesus is Lord and witness to others through Bud's suffering and eventual death. The Petersen's are people I highly respect for their Christian witness. Bud's nurse contacted me and talked with me about what he had witnessed through Bud, Lougene, Beverly and Bonnie's Christian example. His life was affected just like the lives of the Imperial Guards during Paul's Roman imprisonment. 'Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ ... standing firm in one spirit, striving with one mind, side by side, for the faith of the gospel' in the face of life and death and suffering makes a huge impact upon other people's view that 'Life is good' with Jesus Christ as Lord.

Conclusion

As the rear window sticker on my pick up truck says 'Life is good' and mine is so good, to good. I enjoy kicking back with Kenny Chesney and having a beer on my patio. I love my wife and daughters and my son-in-law. I can't wait to be Grandpa and for Friday's to be Grandpa's day-care day. I appreciate all of your Christian friendships. I don't want to die, and I don't want to suffer. But, when I do die, and I will, as you will, also, as the wages of sin, it will be God's ways, not my ways. It will be God's thoughts, not my thoughts. It will be by the 'generosity' of God's grace and love for us sinners that He will welcome us into heaven -- 'that wonderful place filled with glory and grace, where we're gonna see our Savior's face'. Heaven is a wonderful place!

Because Jesus is Lord! Life IS good!

Philippians 1: 21 'For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain'! Amen