

This past summer, I went to Washington D.C. with a couple of my vicar classmates. It was Memorial Day Weekend, so we thought a trip to see some patriotic sites would be very appropriate. First stop, Arlington National Cemetery. Now, if you've never been to Arlington, it's a sight to behold. Rows and rows of identical gravestones for men and women who have died serving our country. Among them are statues, and reflecting pools, or other memorials for great leaders of our armed forces, even a tomb to unknown soldiers who have died in combat. But as I walked around, I was struck by two thoughts. I was struck by the temporality of life and the fight against death.

See, as I walked around thousands of testimonies to that temporary nature of life, I was also struck by the fact that whether Christian or not, we don't like that temporal nature of life. What does a gravestone or a statue or a memorial do? It helps you remember someone! But why? Because we all hate the idea that life ends. It's not in your genetic makeup! When God created Adam and Eve, he didn't create them to die or give them the abilities to deal with death gracefully because there simply was not a concept of death! Those are your genetic parents, and so even though death surrounds you every day, reminding you that this life is temporary, we still cannot seem to find a way to be ok with death. I mean, if we should be "ok" with one thing in our life, it should be the inevitable fact that every single person dies! Yet, we hate the idea that life must come to an end. It's simply human nature.

Now, to kinda get into this section of John that we're talking about today, Jesus says a whole bunch of things about his relationship with God the Father. Now, if you read that first part of the gospel with me and you were not exactly sure what was going on, that's ok! It's a very confusing section unless you understand how God talks about himself. Our God is three persons in one God, we call that the Trinity. Maybe you've heard that term before. But basically that means that Jesus is God just as much as the Father is God. Jesus was just as present and active as the Father was at creation. And Jesus has existed forever and will always exist with the Father and Holy Spirit, but the three persons of the Trinity are one God even though they are three distinct persons. Now, to our mathematical brains, that doesn't really make a lot of sense, but that's how God describes himself, so we believe it. However, it makes sections of the Bible very confusing sometimes. So, here's the point here, even if you don't really understand right now... Jesus is God. He is God just as much as the Father is God and the Holy Spirit is God. That's what you need to remember as he starts talking here.

So, Jesus as God, knowing the future gives us a little sneak peek at the end of time. He says in verses 28 and 29, **"...for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise**

**to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.”** Pretty straight forward, huh? If you die before the end of the world, it’s not the end. You’re going to come back. And...Jesus is going to do his God-thing, he’s going to judge the world on whether they were good or bad because he is God and that’s what God does. But here’s the thing we have to ask ourselves... Are we going to be the ones who have “done what is good” or the ones who have “done what is evil?”

It’s actually interesting to me that there is almost no one in this world who doesn’t care about this question. Just about everyone cares whether they are doing good or evil. Maybe you’ve heard this argument before about atheists. “Well, because you have no God therefore you have no moral standard. That means that there is nothing that is good or evil.” First of all, that’s bad logic, that’s taking what an atheist would say beyond what they actually said, but beyond that, it’s simply not true. I have yet to meet an atheist who truly does not care whether he does good or evil. I’m convinced there aren’t many. Whether it’s because you feel like not killing someone or taking their wife is just a good thing for society or because your community growing up taught you that that is how you should behave or if it’s simply because you don’t want to get pulled over by a cop, almost everyone cares about doing good or evil.

So, everyone is striving for this idea of good over evil, even if they have no concept of heaven, but since we’re dealing here with Jesus’ words and Jesus’ heaven, we have to play by his rules. So, what is “doing good” in God’s eyes? There’s different definitions of that flying around too. There are some religious groups who will say that God’s grace will make you good after all you can do well in your life. But that begs the question...how much good is all I can do? Is it helping one family who is in need a week or two? Is it giving \$100 to help my church or \$200? How much is all I can do? There are also some who will say that as long as your good works outweigh your bad works, you will be considered good. But how many good works do you have? And can you really count the amount of evil things you have done? Who’s keeping track and how close do you have to be? Some will say that if you just avoid the “worst” sins then you’re a good person. I mean, who are the people that we often consider as evil? Hitler, Bin Laden, people who shoot up religious buildings like the Sikh temple in Oak Creek or the Methodist church in Charleston, SC... Those are the people we hear called evil on the radio or TV, right? But is murder worse than letting your eyes linger on a perfume commercial because of the hot girl selling the product? Is murder worse than the judgmental thoughts you have about that person you can’t stand at work? And do you notice something? The last paragraph of this sermon was all questions, and there’s a really good reason for that. We all too often try to figure out what is good or evil even in God’s eyes by our own standards, and every single time, we’re left wondering, how can anyone be sure? Because death is coming... Am I ready for it?

You can see that fear in people all the time. Often times, we wish we could go back and change the things that happened in our lives, don't we? I wish I wouldn't have had sex with him. I wish I wouldn't have wasted those years of my life drinking and partying. I wish I wouldn't have destroyed that relationship by what I said. I wish that abortion didn't happen. If those things could just change, I wouldn't have to fall asleep thinking of myself as the pile of dirt I sometimes feel like. We all at some level hate the idea that we will have to end our life with those things on our record. And ya know, when our bodies get put in the ground, those aren't the things we're going to put on our gravestone. Adulterer, judgmental, liar, selfish... Because we don't want to live forever with those things.

This is amped up when we think about God's perspective on these things. You know, on earth, when you have those regrets, you can forget about them in a bottle, work through them in therapy or make up for them by trying to reconcile with someone, but if you are in the "those who have done evil will rise to be condemned" group, there's no escaping those feelings in hell. In hell there's no relief, there's no therapy, there's no reconciliation, and THAT'S TERRIFYING! Because we don't want to live forever with those things.

You know, I was always struck by what God did in the Garden of Eden for Adam and Eve when they fell into sin. He sent them away from the tree of life and put an angel with a flaming sword there to stop them from coming back to it because he knew that if they ate from the tree of life, they would have to live forever with the guilt that THEY BROUGHT SIN INTO THE WORLD! God didn't want them to have to live with that guilt on earth, and he doesn't want you to live in guilt waiting for death to take you to a place of eternal guilt.

Maybe you've heard the phrase "Dead man walking." It originally came into use in our prison system when people would be sentenced to the death penalty, but it had not been carried out yet. God actually talks the same way. In Ephesians 2, he says, **"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins... Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath."** Hear that? Because of the sinful nature you were born with and all the sins you live with, God considered you as good as dead. You were bound to live your life in guilt until the day that you died a death you weren't made to experience. But look how he continues... **"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved."**

See, none of us wants to die, but what Jesus says is that because God has made you good through the grace he earned on the cross for you, suddenly you aren't a dead person walking. You are alive!

Did you see how serious he is about this? He considers it a done deal! Look verse 24... **“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.”**

God says that through grace, you have actually crossed over from being a spiritually dead being to now a spiritually alive child of God! And being a child of God means that you will not be judged. When the trial comes to see if you should go on spiritual death row, every sin you can't forget, every feeling of guilt you can't escape is not even brought to the trial because there is no sin in the children of God. In God's eyes, you're not the person who made mistakes, you're the person whom he loves and has forgiven.

See, Jesus had every right to judge you and send you to hell. He is God and he laid down his rules, and we disobey them. He is righteous and faithful; we have been anything but that. But Jesus decided that he was going to give you life when you didn't deserve it and freedom when you couldn't earn it.

He gave it to you through his Word which you are hearing right now! Look what he says in verse 25... **Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.** God has revealed to you that you are saved through hearing his Word. You're hearing it right now. Jesus has taken your guilt to the cross so you aren't defined by your sins, but by the eternal life that you know is yours through him!

So, the next time you walk through a cemetery, think about how by nature we hate the idea of death, but remember that for you, death is not the end. For all we know, our death could come tomorrow, but we have nothing to fear. At the end of the world, God will consider us as the ones who have done good because through Christ, we are perfect in God's eyes. We are going to heaven, and nothing can stop that.

Bring on the end! Even though the world fears that every day might be the end, we have nothing to fear. We are ready. God will bring us to heaven to live and to live and to never die. Just like we were made to do. Amen.