

Are We Better? Sanctity of Life Sunday 2019

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What then? Are we any better? Not at all! For we have previously charged that both Jews and Gentiles are all under sin. (Rom 3:9 CSB)

Proposition: Our opposition to abortion must proceed from a place of humility, not self-righteousness.

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I. The Context: Forty-six years of slaughter

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, today we commemorate the forty-sixth gruesome anniversary of the SCOTUS ruling in *Roe v. Wade* that declared abortion a constitutional right. Tens of millions of our fellow citizens have been slaughtered as a direct result of that ruling. Some of us have actively protested outside abortion clinics. Some of us have engaged in social media campaigns. All of us have prayed against this sin, and have sought to flee from it in our own lives and discourage our friends from even considering it. But here's the thing: Our opposition to this crying sin, this moral disaster, cannot come from a place of self-righteousness. I read just yesterday that when abortion clinic workers quit, they generally face stigma and hatred from two groups: their former coworkers, on the one side — and pro-life Christians, on the other. Brothers and sisters, what does that fact tell us? It tells us how easy it is for us to fall into an us vs. them dichotomy in our thinking. It tells us how easy it is to speak against abortion to our church friends who already agree with us — and how hard it is for us to recognize that our sin is no better than their sin. Brothers and sisters, our text this morning is simple. I simply want to look for a few minutes together at Paul's hard-hitting question: "What then? Are we better?"

II. The Question: Are We Better?

Are we better? Does that fact that haven't murdered any of our children, that we haven't spoken that word of hatred against our children and attacked them with that deed of violence, make us better on this Sanctity of Life Sunday? According Scripture, the answer is clear: Not at all. You see, if we were better then Sanctity of Life Sunday could be a feel-good event. On this day, we would get together and it would be my job to tell us all that we are better. As your pastor, my call would be to serve as a cheerleader, as a motivational speaker, as someone who wanted to be sure

that you all know how awful child murder is and how glad we should all be that we haven't participated in it.

Notice the context of our text. Paul has been addressing his fellow Jews. As he comments in Galatians, Jews referred to Gentiles as "Gentile sinners." They boasted in the law; they had no trouble at all with the claim that they were better than their Gentile neighbors because they had the law and they kept the law.

But over the last chapter or so, Paul has been demolishing that pleasant fiction. Though a Jew, he cannot in good conscience write to the Jews and let them know how wonderful they are, how much better they are than Gentile sinners. In this, he shows what genuine ministry needs to be. It often needs to involve calling out your own kind and letting them know that they aren't nearly as wonderful as they would like to think.

There are successful TV preachers out there whose main appeal consists of preaching the culture wars and telling their audience how awful and wretched the world out there is. Beware of those awful abortionists! Beware of those awful people who are in favor of morally bad things! Thank God that we're not like those bad people, that we don't endorse wicked practices and do wicked things! That is the sum total of their messages. But is that the message the Bible presents? No! Brothers and sisters, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, unjust, extortioners, or even like this tax collector" is the prayer of the man God hates. That is the attitude of the Pharisee. And so, to expose that idea for what it is and to cut it off before it can get any traction, Paul asks flat out: Are we better? Look at that worldly scum out there — people who murder their babies and have the gall to ask for our tax money to pay for it! Surely we are better, right?

III. The Answer: Not at all

But what's the answer? Not at all. We aren't better. Name a horrific practice that your favorite culture war opponents engage in, from unjust incarceration to surgical mutilation of little children. Sure those practices are evil. Yes God hates them. Absolutely it is right to stand against them. But the moment you think that because you're against them, or even that because you're effectively against them and have managed to get the power of the state turned against them, that you're better, then Paul's question here rises up and condemns you. You and I are not at all better.

Now, how can that be? Surely the person who does good things is better than the person who does bad things, right? To deny this obvious statement seems to invite moral libertinism. Why try to be good if being good is no better than being bad?

The answer, of course, cuts through the false implication that we might draw from the statement that we are no better than those odious people on the other side of the culture war. The answer is this: We have before charged both Jews and Gentiles that they are all under sin. That's right. Jews — the people of God, as externally viewed — and Gentiles, those who are not the people of God, as externally viewed — are both under sin. That means that sin is over them, dominating them as their master. They can't tell it no. By nature, we are slaves of sin, as Paul

goes on to prove right here in this very chapter. This is true whether you were born into the most loving, kind Christian home or into the most awful Satanist household. Simply by nature, you are under the power of sin. You are in a condition of shame from the moment you're born, and you are guilty before God of doing sinful things.

So is it better to be good than to be bad? Of course! But the fact that you are a Jew, or the fact that you are a church member, does not exempt you from this universal slavery to sin. Hence Paul's insistence that you and I are no better than the most wicked Gentile sinner out there. He's not trying to say that at the end of the day, believers are no different from non-believers. He's not insisting that you might as well sin all you want because it makes no difference. His point is a lot more profound than that; his point is simply that by nature, as you are in yourself, barring God's gracious intervention, you are no better. You're not even better through God's grace, such that you have the right pray "God, I thank you that I'm not like them." Yes grace transforms. But it doesn't transform you into someone who's allowed to be self-righteous.

IV. The Implications

But what about after God's gracious intervention? What about after He makes you a new creature in Christ? What about after He justifies and sanctifies and adopts you? Surely we are better then, right? Surely after twenty grueling years of sanctification and self-denial and trying really hard and praying really hard, *I am better than Kermit Gosnell and Adolf Hitler*. Right? I'm not like those people!

Brothers and sisters, as attractive as that claim is, as intuitively right as it feels, I'm afraid that it's radically contrary to Biblical religion. And it's still contrary to Biblical religion when you dress it up with a pious veneer and ascribe all the glory to God for your wonderfully better condition. Believing you're better is the definition of pride. Daring to pray "God, I thank you that I am not like other men" is a proud prayer. It's a way of claiming superiority even while ascribing all the glory to God. Let's just say that when you pray that, God doesn't believe it. When you approach opposition to abortion, to homosexuality, or to your own lusts (of whatever description they are) from the "I'm better" paradigm, then you're worshipping yourself, not the Father. You're going to have no success in fighting sin because you're fighting sin with sin. Pride in you will never overcome some other kind of sin in somebody else! So brothers and sisters, don't believe that you have to think yourself better than those Gentile sinners, those fill-in-the-blanks that you know are wrong. Wrong they might be; in fact, wrong they likely are. But here's the thing: Self-righteousness kills.

A. Self-Righteousness Kills

You see, to be self-righteous, or to believe in your own moral superiority, is to be an idolater. It's to look to yourself as something of a god, and to fancy yourself to have the internal resources to cope with life and to please God. Brothers and sisters, that isn't the case. We are all under the dominion of sin, and even when Jesus saves us from that dominion, the minute we start thinking that our own goodness and our own deserving saved us we have fallen right back into the trap of self-righteousness. That is a false god, and it will kill. Everyone hates the smugly self-righteous

person, the one who is so sure that he is good and that he is better than you. That attitude kills. It kills the person who has it and it kills the people who come in contact with it. If I come to you to help with the attitude that I'm better than you and that I'm giving you some great thing that a wonderful person like me has and a terrible person like you lacks, do you think that you're going to appreciate that "gift" very much? If as your pastor I condescend to share some insight each week about how you don't measure up to the glory of a full-time Christian worker like myself, are you going to be ever so glad to receive that little crumb and tidbit of encouragement? Of course not! My self-righteousness, in that case, is killing me — and it's killing you too.

B. Only Jesus' Righteousness to the Undeserving Makes Alive

You see, the source of life is not in ourselves. The source of life is in Jesus Christ. He's the one who has made God both righteous and the one who can declare the guilty to be righteous. It's only through His death in the place of Christians who are no better than anyone else that you and I can be saved.

How does this square with the reality that an pro-life state really is better than a pro-death state? Easily. Policies are better and worse. Actions are better and worse. Ideas are better and worse. But people are all by nature under the power of sin. Even when God changes that, bringing us out from under the power of sin, He leaves some sin in us for us to struggle against. He doesn't ever want us to walk around with a superiority complex. Yes, our work leads to life. Yes, good works, including the good work of speaking against abortion and helping deliver little babies from death, are the way to life. But they don't make us better than the people we're trying to help. Far from it. We aren't here to share the good news of how we're so much superior to those benighted pro-choicers. We are here to share the good news that Jesus came to a world where every last person was under sin and broke that dominion. The good news isn't that we are better than them. The good news is that Jesus is better than all of us. So trust Him, this sanctity of life Sunday. Look to Him as the one who truly is better than other men, and who shares His goodness with us all. And fight against this sin of child-murder with the power, not of your own goodness, but of His indestructible life. Amen.