

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

In life, it is important to have strong convictions, and to live them out. To not have such convictions is to be constantly changing one's mind, to be unstable, to never have certainty. As the saying goes, those who stand for nothing fall for anything. Conviction is important.

Yet convictions must be grounded in the truth. A false conviction, no matter how strongly it is believed, is still false. False beliefs, no matter how sincerely they are believed, cannot save, because they are false.

Because God desires all to be saved, He therefore sends the Holy Spirit. As Jesus says, the Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, and He is the Spirit who convicts. God the Holy Spirit convicts of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment, so that people in the world may be brought into the saving truth, and that those who have been brought into the truth, namely, the Holy Christian Church, may be kept in that truth. The Spirit comes to convict, so that we might be saved.

Again, our Lord says of the Spirit: "And when He comes, He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment." These three items of conviction – sin, righteousness, and judgment – aren't just things that the Lord chose at random. They are actually related to each other, with one's understanding or convictions about one leading to convictions about the next. Whether or not these convictions are grounded in the truth brings one to very different conclusions.

Without the truth, how does the world understand sin? I'd say that there are two main lines of thought here. The first is that sin is relative. Our world would say that it's up to each person to decide right and wrong for himself.

Sure, there are common ideas across cultures, like stealing and murder are generally thought of as wrong. But these aren't set in stone, in the world's eyes. For example, if a group is oppressed, and is taking things from the group that is oppressing them, then that's not necessarily wrong and may even be praiseworthy, some would say. Or the world would say that if enough people think a certain human being is not a "person," be that because of his ethnicity or religion or gestational age or brain function, then intentionally ending his life isn't murder but an act of "mercy" or "justice."

And on you can go, making morality – and therefore sin – relative, changing with the times, leaving right and wrong up to the opinions of the majority or the powerful.

This ties into the second part of what the world considers about sin. Sin, at the end of the day, is just breaking some sort of arbitrary rule. Different people establish different rules to live by, and as long as you keep those rules, you aren't sinning. Should the rules change, then what constitutes "sin" changes as well.

But there is nothing deeper or more serious than that. Nothing is being broken beyond an impersonal, arbitrary rule. There can't be anything deeper or more lasting than that, because if people's minds change, it might not even be a sin tomorrow. Sin becomes very superficial.

In then, sin, is breaking rules that change with the times and attitudes, what then is righteousness? It too becomes relative.

In the world's eyes, if someone is a Buddhist and faithfully practices Buddhism, then they're a good person. If someone is a Jew and practices the beliefs of Judaism, be that Reformed, Conservative, Orthodox, or any other form, then that's a form of righteousness. And if someone says they don't really believe anything in particular but they just try to be nice to everyone and help out where they can, then don't you dare say that they're on a wrong path in life.

You're free to say (usually) that "I believe this," or "I think that," but to say that you're right and someone else is wrong, that would be sin! What matters is that people live out their convictions and "be good."

This sense of righteousness comes down to what a person does, then. If sin is breaking a rule, then righteousness is not breaking that rule. Being good is doing good deeds.

How many of them do you need to do? Well, it depends on who's asking, because again, worldly sin and righteousness are all relative. If someone is a strict follower of a religion, then they need to follow all the rules.

If someone is more laid back, then as long as you're doing more good than bad, keeping the rules more often than they're breaking them, you're good! You'll end up in heaven, or paradise, or nirvana, or crossing the rainbow bridge, whatever you believe. Just be sincere and live out your convictions and you'll be just fine.

With sin being relative and about breaking arbitrary rules, and righteousness also being relative and about keeping your preferred rules, judgment must be relative and arbitrary, too. And in the world's way of thinking, it is. So no worries, right? No judgment is good, right?

As it turns out, that isn't a good thing, for a few reasons. Number one, humans live in groups, and in a group different people will have different thoughts, ideas, and opinions. When these different ideas come into conflict, you have to judge which is right and which is wrong. But if there's no judgment, what do you do?

You may think that your TV belongs to you, but the guy who slipped into your house while you were gone and took it thinks it now belongs to him. If stealing and property ownership are relative, what are you going to do?

A man assaults your pregnant daughter and by his violent actions causes her to miscarry. Did he murder your grandchild, or just cause her to suffer pain through the loss of a clump of cells from her uterus? How will you judge?

Without objective judgment, right and wrong being given from outside, every moral decision turns into a matter of opinion and inevitably ends up with might making right. Whoever has the bigger muscles, or the better lawyers, or writes the history books – that person will be "right."

Number two, if judgment is left up to the individual, then there can be no certainty in the face of death. It's all fine and good if you think that righteousness is doing more good than bad, or performing a certain number of good deeds, or keeping a certain percentage of given rules, especially when you get to decide what the passing score is.

But when you're confronted by death, your ideas on this will be thrown into doubt. Have you done enough good? How do you know? Are you certain of your standard? Were you really as kind as you made yourself out to be, or were you just good at covering your tracks and hiding your intentions? Did you spend your days as you should have? Did you keep the right rules often enough?

With death looming, there's no chance to go back and fix mistakes. And death is not arbitrary, not one of those things you can decide for yourself about. Denial has a zero percent success rate when it comes to preventing death. As the darkness comes, a life of pride and doing as you please gives way to terror and sorrow, and a judgment that cannot be avoided.

This isn't what the Lord God desires for people, though. He didn't create anyone for the purpose of destroying them in hell. Rather, He desires that all be saved, that all come to dwell with Him for eternity. And so, as a part of saving men from that darkness, He sends the Holy Spirit, who by the truth convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment.

A portion of this truth is the revelation of God's holy Law. The Almighty has established what is good and right, and what is evil and wrong. And these are established forever; they are not up for revision or amendment.

This is because God's decrees of good and evil come from His very nature. He tells us that certain things are good, not just because He picked them out of thin air, but because they reflect Him, and He is the source of goodness itself.

Murder is wrong because all life comes from Him. Adultery is wrong because He is perfectly faithful, even to the unfaithful. Stealing is wrong because all things belong to Him and He gives them as He knows is best. Lying is wrong because He is truth itself. Covetousness is wrong because He is the source of contentment.

Sin, then, isn't just breaking some arbitrary rule. Sin is acting, speaking, or thinking against the very nature of God Himself. Sin is rebellion on a cosmic scale, defying the Lord and Creator of the Universe, and doing so as one of His creations. Sin is unbelief, as Jesus says, because to sin is to doubt the truthfulness and goodness and love of God and pick our own path instead. And as belief – faith – joins us to God, unbelief cuts us off from Him.

This is what makes sin so severe. It's not just superficial mistakes, oopsies, or accidents. It is something that separates man from the life and love and good of God.

The Lord tells us in His word that "the wages of sin is death." This isn't the case because the Lord is super harsh and wrathful and desires to blast people who step out of line. Our sin brings death because it cuts us off from God, and there is no life apart from Him. Unbelief damns, not because Jesus is really insecure and can't take no for an answer, but because it is a refusal to accept the salvation which only He possesses.

As sin and its effects are so great, so too is the righteousness which the Holy Spirit convicts us of. We can strive against sin and death all we want, looking for paths to immortality every day of our lives. We can do what we think are good works until we collapse in exhaustion.

None of it will ever prevent death, because none of it can do away with sin. Only the blood of Jesus can do that. Only His righteousness avails for sin. Jesus kept the Law perfectly for us, in our place, satisfying its requirements through His righteous life. Sin never entered His actions, His words, not even His thoughts. And Jesus offered up His perfect life to wipe away our sins.

The gap that sin created between God and man was bridged with the cross of Christ. The wall of division that was created by our rebellion was broken down by His love. Our lives, in which our best deeds are described by the Bible as “filthy rags,” are clothed in the pure white robe of His righteousness.

No one else can do this. No other way to salvation and eternal life exists. The Holy Spirit is very clear about this truth, inspiring the prophets, apostles, and evangelists to put it into Scripture many places.

The Spirit caused John to write down the words Jesus spoke to the apostles in the upper room: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

The Spirit caused Luke to record the words which He gave to Peter before the Jewish ruling council: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

The Spirit inspired James to warn Christians, writing in our Epistle reading: “Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”

Though we may not see Christ since His ascension to the right hand of the Father, the Spirit still gives us the gifts of Christ. Through the Spirit, Jesus speaks to us in His word and works righteousness in our hearts. Through the Spirit, we are joined to Christ and clothed in His righteousness at Baptism. Through the Spirit, Jesus comes and gives us His true body and true blood in His Supper, bestowing forgiveness, which grants righteousness.

Finally then, the Spirit convicts us of judgment – and for Christians, this is a comfort and a source of joy.

God the Holy Spirit has given us the Holy Bible, preserving God’s word for His people still today. And so, when it comes to judging between right and wrong, we’re not at the mercy of human opinion and might making right. We have the judgments and just decrees of our God that show us His holiness and lead us in His path.

We also then don’t have to bear the weight of making such judgments. The responsibility to decide right and wrong isn’t on us – that burden would crush us – God has already determined this. We just speak His judgments, His word, to the world, knowing that we’re just the messengers, and the message we’ve been given is perfect.

We also have the judgment of God given for us concerning our sins. Our sins truly are a great and terrible thing, and their consequence would be eternally awful. But as great as our sins are, the blood of Jesus is greater still. Our Lord has paid the cost, suffered the punishment, endured the penalty, for each and every one of our sins.

For those who believe in Jesus, the judgment at the Last Day has already been declared: innocent! When God the Father looks on His Church, He sees, not our sins, but the righteousness of His Son. We don’t have to earn it – it’s been given as a free gift.

And having such confidence of righteousness, we are able to do truly good and God-pleasing works. The Spirit, dwelling in our hearts, causes His fruits to come forth in our lives, letting us show true love to our neighbors and lead them to Christ.

Finally, by the conviction of God's judgment, we know that we have nothing to fear in this life. As Jesus says, "the ruler of this world is judged." Satan has lost. The serpent's head has been crushed at the foot of the cross.

He may try to appear scary, a roaring lion hiding in the shadows, but he has to remain in the shadows, for if he came out in the light, it would be obvious that his claws and fangs have been pulled out, that he has been mortally wounded by the wounds of Christ and doesn't have much longer.

Though we may face troubles and persecution – as did the apostles – the victory has already been won. We know how this all ends, because the Spirit of Truth has revealed it to us. The Helper assures us that our Lord has risen from the dead, never to die again, and all who are joined to Him will rise as well.

The world would seek to rob us of this confidence, to undermine our convictions. And if we rely on our own reason and strength, it will seem that the world's ideas of sin, righteousness, and judgment are much more appealing.

But our Lord has sent us the Helper, who convicts of truth and declares to us the things that are to come. We need not ask Jesus, "Where are you going?" as He says to the apostles, for the Spirit has given us the words of Jesus: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." In this Spirit-given conviction, brothers and sisters, may your hearts be fixed where true joys are found.

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