

Use This Gospel!
Luke 18:10-14
Ash Wednesday
February 22, 2023
Pastor John Klawiter, Preaching

Grace and peace to you my siblings in Christ,

Historically, the practices of Lent have involved fasting—from food, from chocolate, from vices.

That's great—if you take on a spiritual practice such as that, do it for the right reasons. Are you doing it as punishment? Are you doing it to be like Jesus in the wilderness?

I have breaking news for you—we can't be like Jesus. We will naturally give in to temptations and will fall short.

Sin has claimed us—but, there's good news. We are not hopeless.

The end of these 40 days will end in promise and hope.

Spoiler alert—because of the death and resurrection of Jesus—we don't have to try to do it ourselves.

We aren't perfect. God knows that. God doesn't expect that.

God expects us to respond to that gift of grace with love.

This reading hits home because so often, as we look around at leaders in the political, sports, or entertainment world, being the center of attention is often the expectation.

As consumers, we are given a false image of what it means to succeed. What it means to be good.

True humility, especially in those realms, is rare—but when we see it, it stands out.

On Sunday, I asked the kids to start looking for crosses. Find crosses in unusual or unexpected places.

Here's an example: (picture)

What's so unusual about that? We see crosses around the neck of people all the time!

What about around HIS neck? (show Eminem)

Did you know, despite all of our assumptions about Eminem, he's a Christian—his last album reached #1 on the Billboard Hot Christian Songs chart. In "Use this Gospel", Eminem shares about the attacks from Satan and how God has helped him.

If we are suspicious of his sincerity, **we are forgiven by Christ on the cross** (show cross in ash).

It's not that much different than what plays out in the gospel.

When Jesus witnesses two men in the temple—one boastful about his success in all the religious requirements, while the other begs for mercy because he knows he falls short—he responds.

He responds in a way that other leaders will resent. They want to be lifted up—told to keep up the good work.

But that's not what Jesus says.

Jesus says that the second man goes home justified. That he is in a "right" relationship with God.

Even though he's a sinner? Cheated others or caused harm to a neighbor?

Wait—HE is the good guy in this scenario?

Aren't we the same? Don't be like those rappers, or athletes, or politicians, or celebrities that engage in bad behaviors and waste lavish amounts of money!

Was our first emotion upon seeing the picture of Eminem to think "upright, model Christian"? Probably not.

What a great reminder that because of our self-awareness, we know we aren't justified by our actions or words, but through the love of Christ in our heart.

As the words of Psalm 51 rang out, the writer has committed grave sins. In our current context, it's the type of sins that would rightfully send the man to prison.

The psalm is written as a response to David being called out by the prophet Nathan for those sins—David lacked any self-awareness that his actions have caused evil and harm.

Now, he begs for mercy. *Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me.*

Reconciliation is not easy. Not with others that we've hurt or who have hurt us. It's not easy for us to admit our short-comings—even with God.

But today, we're in the right place. Whether you are here in the sanctuary or watching from home or on a phone while sitting in your car or in a waiting room at a hospital prepping for surgery—you are in the right place with God.

Look around the room.

Look at y'all. You look ridiculous!!! You are a mess!

We are covered in the dirtiness of our sins.

We wear this cross and self-reflect on what our shortcomings are.

What have we done... or failed to do? What words have we spoken that hurt... or words that we didn't speak when something needed to be said?

What prayers have we neglected... what gaps do we have in our relationship with God?

This is the time for our focus to be on God.

Create in us, clean hearts Oh God... and continue to guide us to be in a right relationship with you. Amen.