

So how's your bracket looking? There's a big game tomorrow night and, while you may have rightly picked the final two, my guess is you took a circuitous route to get there. No one I know has been doing well. Lots of losses, lots of upsets, and many just saying "I could use a win."

Our brackets are a lot like our lives these days. There have been a lot of upsets, a lot of losses the last couple of years. And many of us are just saying "I could use a win." What about you? Could you use a win? Well, you've come to the right place.

It wasn't always this way. In the beginning there were no upsets. Humanity lived in perfect harmony with God and each other and the created world was perfect and alive. We were at peace. Not just the absence of anxiety and conflict, but a full and flourishing life. But, as you know, sin entered the world and broke everything; our relationships, our bodies, all of creation, and our position as co-rulers. We now lived in a crumbling world, subjected to the power and penalty of sin, and under the dominion of an enemy who sought our destruction, Satan.

All of these were symptoms of a great loss incurred long ago, and we continue to experience them today. You know the list: social strife, political division, global pandemic, isolation, and now war, runaway inflation, and a return of some of the worst fashion from the 80's. It's enough to crush our hearts and cause us to lose hope. We begin to ask questions like "Is Jesus really in control?" "What is God waiting for? When will he return?" and say things like "If Jesus won, I'd hate to see what losing looks like." As believers, we know the Gospel, but we can struggle to take heart, remain hopeful, and live in peace. When those moments come, and they will, it's good for us to remember what Christ has accomplished and live in that glorious reality.

In John 16, with the cross mere hours away, Jesus took one more moment to address his closest followers. He knows his arrest, crucifixion, and three days in the grave will scatter and decimate them, and he knows the world in which they, and we, will spread the Gospel will remain broken and hostile until he comes back to set all things right. So, Jesus says this: **[John 16:33] ³³ I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.**

There is no denying we are in a broken world and regularly experience tribulation and suffering. Even Jesus says so. It is a world dominated by sin, ruled by the evil one (whom Paul calls the god of this world), and in constant decay. But Jesus tells us not all is lost. Instead he says to "take heart", be encouraged, cheer up, because he has overcome it. He uses a military term that means to conquer. It's a claim of victory. And while that victory is yet to be fully realized, the battle is won and there is a clear winner. You may be in the world, but if you are also in Christ, you get the spoils of that victory. **Because he won, we win.** And so, for the next three weeks, we are going to look at what Jesus's life, death, and resurrection overcame so we can take heart and live in peace even when the difficulties come. The choice for us is if we are going to live in defeat or live in the victory Christ has already won.

We are going to begin with the condemnation of our sin. A couple weeks ago I was enjoying breakfast at Cindy's...yes, I was cheating on Norma's...when our waiter came up to our table and said our bill had been taken care of by someone else. So generous. My debt was gone. I owed nothing else. They could hold nothing over me. I was free, and it was awesome.

We all have a bill that needs to be paid, all have a debt we were born with. It is the debt created by our sin that could only be paid for by the shedding of blood, and it's a debt God would see paid in full one way or another. Thankfully God made a way for it to be paid off apart from us, but how we view the settlement of that debt determines how we live with and for Christ.

[Colossians 2:13-14] ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

The wages of sin is death. All of us are born losers, dead in our sin, dead to God, and separated from him forever. You were not condemned the first time you sinned. You were born already stained by sin and condemned to eternal death. We just kept adding to the bill. Sin is a violation of God's law. God gave his law as a standard, and you can actually get to heaven if you live it perfectly. But none of us can, so the law exposed our shortcomings. It was a diagnostic, and all of us were declared terminal. The penalty of sin is death. Our sin indebted us to God and the payment due is our lives. But because of Jesus, we have been made alive in him. How did he do that? By paying our bill and overcoming the condemnation of our sin.

This is a painting of the crucifixion by Cano Alonso. As it is often depicted, Jesus is shown with what looks like a sign above him. This is a Roman *titulus*. It was a placard placed above the crucified that stated their name and the charges against them. It was intended to be a justification of why that person deserved death. For Jesus, INRI is the first letter of each Latin word "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". It identified who he was, and the charge leveled against him by the Jews who wanted him dead (it was also the glorious truth!).

But here's what Paul is saying. That wasn't the only charge hanging above Jesus on that day. **Your name and your sin, my name and my sin, were nailed to the cross, above our Savior, who took our place and paid the debt we owed for our sin...** those we have committed, are committing, and will commit. The condemnation for breaking God's law was settled by Christ. He paid the bill for us. The charges against us were nailed to his cross, and because they were, God declares "Paid in full!". And because he paid it in full, your life can be full.

Jesus overcomes our condemnation by satisfying the penalty of the law we couldn't keep. God's law is good. It expresses his heart and living by it leads to flourishing. But we are no longer under it, required to keep it perfectly, and incur a debt when we don't. Jesus took care of it, and there is no longer any condemnation for those in Christ. Because he overcame, we are free.

But how many of us really live free of it? We read a passage like this and say ok, but still have this sense we need to make up for something. We strive, perform, try to justify ourselves just in case what Jesus did isn't enough. We try to earn God's love and forgiveness instead of just receiving it as the gift it is. We believe we can add to our worth instead of resting in the worth that comes from Jesus. We struggle to believe God when he calls us righteous, approved, child, forgiven, redeemed. And so we still walk in defeat instead of in victory. We carry around the self-imposed and others-imposed burden of "should". And the cost is intimacy with God, joy and fullness in life, and likely a lousy witness to others.

Where are you striving? Where are you trying to add to what Jesus has already done for you? Where are you convinced that if you just achieve a little more, follow the rules a little better, meet everyone else's expectations, help pay the bill just a bit, that you and God will be good? **It's a good thing to live a life worthy of the Lord, but God is inviting you to do that not by trying to satisfy him but out of the reality he is already fully satisfied in you.** You are secure. You are free. Your bill has been paid. Jesus has overcome. We need to rest in that because there is someone else who is going to try to convince us otherwise.

[Colossians 2:15] ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

You and I live not only in a broken world but in a broken world system. The head of that system is Satan. His name in Hebrew means "adversary", in Greek "accuser". He hates God, hates you, knows he's lost, but is not going to go out without a fight. The devil and his minions do their best work when they can separate us from God. We are a people created to live in intimacy with God forever, and if he can get in between that, he's winning. He succeeded in the Garden of Eden, tried to get Job to curse God, tried to get Jesus to disobey his Father, and he prowls around like a roaring lion looking to destroy us and take us out of the fight. He targets the vulnerability of your sin and brings his weapons of guilt, shame, fear, and regret to convince you you're still losing even though you've already won.

Spiritual warfare is always challenging to talk about. We can dismiss it and ignore a powerful enemy scripture makes clear is at work. We can also see the devil behind every negative thought, feeling, action, and outcome and, in turn, abdicate ourselves from responsibility. But it's real. He's real and he wants to hold you back, tear you down, take you out. He wants to take you back to that thing you did, the way you lived, the labels you and others put on you. He whispers "Sinner. Unworthy. God could never love you. Jesus would never forgive you. You stand condemned." He reminds me of when I've failed in the past and says that's who I am, that people are going to find out I'm a fraud, and so I bear down and start striving and running over people. What is it for you? Where does the devil try to get leverage over you? Think about that right now and then hear these words.

JESUS HAS OVERCOME! Jesus has taken care of it. Jesus has paid for it. And he did so through the cross. The instrument of disgrace and shame that was thought to have defeated Jesus is the very thing Jesus uses to achieve victory and bring our enemy to defeat and shame. The devil has been disarmed. The sin he uses to leverage his power in this world and to use against you has been nailed to the cross. It has been paid in full. **The devil has nothing to use against you because God no longer holds anything against you.** We are going to spend a few weeks after Easter talking more about this very thing but today, rest in Christ's victory. The devil is a loser. Everything he tells you is a lie. It is his native tongue. Christ reigns victorious and what he says about you is all the truth you need. When the devil calls you sinner, Jesus says "forgiven". When the devil calls you broken, Jesus says "made whole". When the devil calls you unlovable, Jesus says "I love you so much that I'm laying my life down for you." When the devil calls you unworthy, Jesus calls you his friend.

Live in the victory that's already been won. It's been said that for some, the gates of forgiveness have been unlocked and open by God, but too many of us don't step out. We choose to stay in the prison of condemnation, choose defeat, instead of stepping out in the victory Christ has secured. Jesus does not want you there. You have too much life to live with and for him, too many people in your life who need to see what forgiveness looks like, too much glory to give to God as you live in that freedom. So how do we do that?

[John 16:33, 1 John 5:4-5] ³³I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”...⁴For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

It is by our faith that we claim our victory in Christ and overcome all this broken world tries to throw at us. **We are overcomers because he overcame.** If you are here this morning and have never done that, placed your faith in Jesus, it's a perfect day to do it. Your sin has separated you from God and destined you to death. There is nothing you can do to make up for it. You have a debt that needs to be paid, and you can either pay it with your own life, or you can have Jesus pay it for you. You can transfer that debt to him by confessing you are a sinner, believe Jesus died for those sins and rose again, and receive him as your Lord and Savior. You can go to our prayer rooms, Connecting Center, come talk to me if you want someone to walk through that with you. If you make that decision today, you win.

For the rest of us, you will never be back on the losing side, but we can still live like that. But God wants you free from the condemnation of sin, the power of sin, the penalty of sin. You don't have to muster up anything, don't have to try harder, don't have to strive. Jesus has overcome it all. **Your faith is your inclusion in Christ's victory.** We live victorious when we desperately hold on to the cross, knowing he is our only hope and it's there where your debt was paid in full, and the power and penalty of sin was broken. We live in this victory when we preach the gospel to ourselves and one another and remind us of who we are in Christ. Jesus said, “In me you will have peace.” If we look for it anywhere else, we won't find it. We spend a lot of time looking for peace, reassurance, comfort in other places. But everywhere else we look is part of the broken world that is guaranteed to disappoint. It's only found in Christ, and if you believe in him, you have victory with him.

And so we close this morning by remembering and celebrating what Jesus did to overcome. We are going to celebrate communion. In the upside down Kingdom we are a part of, what looked like a loss was actually a win. Jesus said this is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you and for all for the forgiveness of sins, to pay the debt we owe. He has done it all. Let us take heart as we celebrate communion together and live in the victory he has won.