

## THE MARK OF THE CHRISTIAN

Colossians 3:1-17 (*esp. Col 3:12-14*)  
John 13:33-35  
John 17:21

Greetings...

...may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Please join me in prayer:

*Almighty God,  
To Whom all hearts are open,  
All desires known,  
And from Whom no secrets are hid;  
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts  
By the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
That we may perfectly love You,  
And worthily magnify your Holy Name,  
Through Christ our Lord, Amen.*

Some of you may be familiar with that prayer. It's a prayer I grew up with as a boy in the Church of England and is still used as part of the worship service in that church, along with the American version of it, the Episcopal Church; and, as I understand, in the Lutheran Church. Perhaps in other churches, too...

I've come to have an enormous appreciation for that prayer and I'd like to spend some time exploring it with you. You'll see that laminated copies of it have been provided for you with your bulletin for those of you who wish to make use of it beyond today.

As with any authentic prayer, we are addressing God. Almighty God. The God of heaven and earth. Sovereign Lord. While the ungodly pray to their idols, we have been given the privilege of coming into the very presence of God and speaking directly to Him. As Christians, one of the first fruits of our justification is personal access to God:

*"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand**".  
(Romans 5:1-2)*

And our God is a Personal God. "Almighty God, to **Whom** all hearts are open..." He's not the "Force" or some cosmic wind. He's not the sun, the moon, a comet, or any other astronomical

body. And He's not one of many gods. He's the One, True, All-Powerful, absolutely Sovereign, ***Personal***, Lord. He has feelings, He thinks, and He wills. He's spoken and continues to speak through His Word. And He's acted in history and continues to act through His Providence.

Our God is also perfectly omniscient. He knows absolutely everything about everything. "Almighty God, to Whom ***all*** hearts are open, ***all*** desires known and from Whom ***no secrets*** are hid..." There is nothing He does not know. He knows every thought we've ever had, now have, and will yet have. He knows with total clarity every longing our hearts have ever had, now have, and will yet have. He knows it all...fully, perfectly, and completely. Our deepest secrets are totally exposed before His sovereign gaze. And there is nowhere we can go or nothing we can do to escape this truth. King David, the Psalmist, understood that, didn't he?

*"O Lord, you have searched me and you know me.  
You know when I sit and when I rise;  
You perceive my thoughts from afar.  
You discern my going out and my lying down;  
You are familiar with all my ways.  
Before a word is on my tongue,  
You know it completely, O Lord...  
...Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?"*  
(Psalm 139:1-4,7)

And this truth is one of the things I appreciate so much about this prayer. I'm a Christian, but I'm still a sinner. And as a Christian, I need to deal that on a daily basis for the obvious and excellent reason that I sin every day. My heart – as Pastor Mark reminded us of last week – is still an idol factory. It does us absolutely no good whatsoever to deny that fact. Apart from the grace of God, our hearts are forever wandering.

That's another thing I like about this prayer: in the presence of our Sovereign, Personal, and Omniscient God, we're acknowledging the fact to Him and to ourselves that we still have dirty hearts. Since becoming a Christian, I may have a cleaner heart now than I did then, but the reality is that how much it still needs to be cleansed is off the chart! We still have a long way to go in our lifelong sanctification. We need to appreciate that. It's here's where self-righteousness just doesn't get it, and how many times do we fall into that trap? Comparing ourselves with another and concluding we're better than they are; assuming we're more righteous than they are; or worse – God forbid – assuming that we're actually worthy of God's admiration and respect. We've all seen professing Christians behave that way, haven't we? Are any of us there now? Oh, how much we have fallen short of the glory of God!

We desperately need to remember that as Christians, our righteousness is not our own. It was provided for us and God clothes us with it. We are accepted in the sight of God solely by the righteousness of another, Jesus Christ. Ours is never – and never will be – good enough. Fig leaves – or whatever we try to use in their place – never work, do they?

That's why I like the way this prayer openly confesses a dirty heart before God and petitions Him to cleanse it: "...**Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts** by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit..."

If you'll bear with me for a moment, there are a few things to note about this petition that should be mentioned. First, our hearts **need** to be cleansed. They wouldn't need to be cleansed if they weren't dirty to begin with, but they are dirty. Really dirty.

When God looked down upon the earth in Noah's time, the bible says:

*“The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that **every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time**”.*  
(Genesis 6:5)

In the Fall, mankind spiritually died. Our hearts descended into darkness and **cannot** come out of apart from divine grace.

*“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and **their foolish hearts were darkened**”.*  
(Romans 1:21)

And, of course, Jesus spoke much about the condition of man's heart, didn't he?

*“...out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks”.*  
(Matthew 12:34)

*“...this people's heart has become calloused”.*  
(Matthew 13:15)

*“...the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean'. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander”.*  
(Matthew 15:34)

We may not like to hear this about ourselves, but as Christians this **is** the reality we need to face. We are redeemed, but our hearts are not yet glorified and we must do battle with our sinfully inclined hearts on a daily basis. That's what sanctification is all about: growing up in the faith as we do battle against our inherent sinful nature...putting off the old man as we put on the new man. Which, by the way, is what Mark Luker will be preaching on next week, so we can look forward to that...

So, we have filthy hearts and they **need** to be cleansed. That brings us to the second point: our hearts **can** be cleansed. We might think, “well, duh!”, but why do so many of us fall back to the practice of some form of “works-righteousness”. That is, we have to earn our way back into God's favor. Or we may agree in principle that justification, or conversion to Christ is all of grace, but are we really living as if my growth in the faith is all up to me. We're **so** blessed that God's patient with us, aren't we?

Jesus Christ died so that we **can** have our hearts cleansed. It was His shed blood that made it possible. That's what the gospel is all about: His life for mine. He died in my place, absorbed the wrath of God I deserve, **and** provided the righteousness I need to stand before a Holy God.

He did that for me. And He did that for all who will put their personal trust in Him. If you are here today and have never put your personal faith in Him, then in the Name of Jesus Christ receive His grace, repent of your sins, embrace Jesus Christ and **be** blessed!

For those of us who do believe, let us never forget that He continues “to work in [us] to will and to act according to His good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). Yes, we participate in our own spiritual growth, but God Himself is our intimate Partner, Who actively participates in leading us in our sanctification.

Which, of course, is the third thing to note: our hearts **will** be cleansed as we submit to God’s revealed will for our lives:

*“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified...”*  
(1 Thessalonians 4:3)

And in Colossians 3:

*“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things...Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly (sinful) nature”*  
(Colossians 3:1-2,5)

We just read: “Christ is seated at the right hand of God”. What is He doing there? Wringing His hands together hoping against hope that things on earth will somehow work out for the Kingdom? Of course not. While the world doesn’t believe it, He reigns on high now. He acts in the present, providentially working all things – ALL things – together for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28) and He intercedes for each us day in and day out.

*“...Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us”*  
(Romans 8:34)

Isn’t that amazing? The Lord Jesus Christ is praying for me. He is praying for you. Think about that...the Lord Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of God praying for us! And since we know that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective (James 5:16b), we can be absolutely certain that the prayer of **The** Righteous Man is altogether powerful and perfectly effective. What grace!

So – our hearts **need** to be cleansed; they **can** be cleansed, and they **will** be cleansed. And this is where our prayer acknowledges how this will be accomplished: “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts **by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit**”.

Jesus promised His disciples that when He left them, He would send them – us – the Counselor, the Spirit of truth in His place.

*“I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment...”*  
(John 16:7-8)

But just how does the Spirit of God act? What does “...by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit” actually mean? The key lies in understanding that God does not just care about results, the “ends”. He cares deeply about the “means”. The old adage “the end justifies the means” has most certainly been abused through the ages and the church has not been immune from that abuse.

Indeed, any church or individual Christian can and does become abysmally weak and ineffective in this world precisely because worldly means are being used to accomplish godly ends. It doesn’t work – it never has, and it never will.

What do I mean? Well, take some of the contemporary social issues of our day. Politics, abortion, homosexuality, right-to-life issues (Terry Schiavo, for instance), and so on. Should Christians be involved in these issues? Of course we should. But HOW we do so matters. If we try to engage the world on these issues using worldly means, we are doomed to fail. We may win a few battles along the way, but we’ll lose the war.

We need to ask ourselves in all honesty: how well is the church of Jesus Christ doing at winning the culture war? While we don’t see everything as God does, we **can** see what’s going on around us. There are churches, for example, that in the name of tolerance and acceptance have surrendered to the radical homosexual agenda and in so doing have made a complete mockery of the Word of God.

It’s a real war. And a real war is waged with real weapons. What are those weapons? What are the weapons that our Commander-In-Chief has given to us?

1. The Sword of the Spirit / the Word of God, and
2. Prayer

That’s it. The rest is armor! You remember what it says in Ephesians 6?

*“Put on the full armor of God...the belt of truth...the breastplate of righteousness...gospel of peace...shield of faith...helmet of salvation...sword of the Spirit...and prayer”.*  
(Ephesians 6:13-18)

All of them are defensive in nature, but only two can be used offensively: the Word of God and Prayer. And, again, how we use them matters.

As it says in 2 Corinthians:

*“For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ”.*  
*(2 Corinthians 10:3-5)*

It’s our task to make faithful use of the tools that God has already provided. We have no business laying them down in favor of the tempting worldly means that Satan throws our way, do we?

What happens, though, when we *do* make use of the tools God has provided? In church parlance, these tools have been given a name: the “Means of Grace”. And rightly so – they are the means to the gracious ends God intends. And because it’s in the means that relationship happens. And relationship is very important to God, isn’t it?

Guys, fathers – today is Father’s Day. Does your relationship with your kids happen by focusing exclusively on the goal? My daughter is 2 sessions into her “Biddy Baseball” class. How much sense would it be for me to berate her and be harsh with her because she hasn’t won a game yet? That would be absurd.

A few years ago I joined my work softball team, bought a \$50 baseball glove, and intended to go have some fun. Unfortunately, the team was so focused on winning that it had little time or patience for a novice on board. I was just a warm body filling the team roster and rarely got to do anything of substance. So I quit. Does this happen in the church? Of course it does. Ladies – haven’t you felt like that? Being asked to be part of the team, only to find out you were a necessary statistic so the team could play in the league? Does a whole lot to build relationship, doesn’t it?

Guys – we’re not the best at relationship, are we? That’s why God gave us woman. (That’s a complement, ladies). I know I need to work on my relationships, particularly with those whom I love the most. My wife, my daughter, my immediate and extended family, my close friends...but especially with God. And how can any relationship develop if there is little or no attempt to spend time with the other? Obviously, it can’t.

Which brings us back to the “Means of Grace”...the means used by God the Holy Spirit in our daily lives to help us grow up in the faith and in relationship.

Obviously, God can use anything in all creation that he wishes to use in general as a means of grace – a camping trip, a quiet hike in the forest, skiing, star-gazing in the middle of the night...you name it. But He’s provided specific tools – or ordinances – for His people to help us grow up.

1. The Word of God
2. The Sacraments – baptism and the Lord’s Supper
3. Prayer
4. Discipline
5. Fellowship of the Saints

We believe and confess that the bible is the divinely inspired Word of God. Literally, it is “God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16) – the Word of God breathed out to us. And so it’s no ordinary book; it exposes us to the very heart of God. Remember Jesus said:

*“...out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks”.*  
(Matthew 12:34)

He also said, when confronting Satan in His wilderness temptations:

*“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”.*  
(Matthew 4:4)

So if, as we believe, the Scripture is the God-breathed (or spoken) words of God to us, then nothing less than the overflow of the heart of God has been revealed to us. It’s His heartbeat! We have been given a taste of the heart of God...to which our hearts are to respond with loving adoration.

This is the essence of what is meant in our prayer: “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts **by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit**”. And as our lives are exposed to Word of God, the Holy Spirit does something within us:

*“The Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account”.*  
(Hebrews 4:12-13)

Indeed, the Word itself declares that it will accomplish what God intends it to do:

*“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it”.*  
(Isaiah 55:10-11)

That’s a promise! Our task is to be immersed in it regularly trusting that God will do the work of transforming our minds and changing our hearts through the active ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It’s not easy and it’s not always pleasant at the time, but we can rest secure in the fact that when God acts to cleanse our hearts it is always a blessing.

Another if the Means of Grace is **prayer**. God speaks to us in His Word; we speak to Him in prayer. And the psalms are great tools to help us with prayer, aren’t they? Full of emotion, heartache and joy and many people use them as prayers themselves...the Word returned.

Last week, we were blessed in witnessing the *baptism* of Jillian Jane Morris. What a treasure that is to the people of God, isn't it? A visible reminder of the promises of God to His people. I was baptized as an infant – I don't remember a thing about it, obviously – but in God's timing, He took hold of me through the ministry of some very dear friends of mine, and took my stony cold, spiritually dead heart and breathed new life into it. Just as He did with Steve Slaughter who shared with us last week. My baptism was not about me; it's all about God and His acting out His promises. It's His grace, from first to last. And we get to be reminded about those promises every time we witness another soul being baptized – *the Word shown forth*.

The same goes for the *Lord's Supper*, doesn't it? The bread and wine (or juice) serving as a regular reminder – as often as we choose to do it – of the gracious sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. Living a perfect life, willingly becoming our Scapegoat and dying a perfect death as the Lamb of God. *Again – the Word shown forth*.

We are also richly blessed as we *fellowship* with one another as we're encouraged and nurtured in the faith. Small group bible studies, social gatherings, time together over a meal... *the Word shared*...

And finally, *discipline*. *The Word practiced*. Perhaps the hardest of all – at least it is for me. Because this is where I have to do battle the most against my own sinful nature. Putting into practice what I know. But that's the goal of our relationship with God, isn't it? Which is why in our prayer we pray, "...**So that we may perfectly love You**..."

The goal of the Christian life – as commanded by God in the first and greatest commandment – is to:

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind".*  
(Luke 10:27)

Of course, we will never love God "perfectly" in this life. But we should never lower the goal to make it more palatable or attainable, should we? We ought to be always growing in our love for God, growing closer to the ultimate goal of perfect love for Him, understanding that we'll never get there in this life. Perfect love for God awaits us in glory! Nevertheless, as a command, the Holy Spirit is certainly active in each of our lives leading us into a deeper understanding of what love for God means. I think the best example is when Jesus has his feet washed by the tears of a sinful woman. In addressing the hosting Pharisee, Jesus says:

*"...her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little".*  
(Luke 7:47)

It's plain from Jesus that there is a direct correlation between our understanding of how much we have personally been forgiven by God and how much we practice love for God. The one who understands how much he has been forgiven loves much; the one who doesn't, loves little. Which begs the question – how much do we really understand our own forgiveness from God? If the Holy Spirit is present in our lives, we can be certain He is working to enlarge that understanding. Because He wants us to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength.



Incidentally, that's how we can discern the difference between God convicting us of the guilt of our sinfulness and the attack of Satan in his accusations against us. God leads us to conviction of sin and follows it through with leading us in repentance and granting forgiveness. A wonderfully sweet grace. Satan does it to paralyze us by trapping us in guilty feelings. Once we understand that difference that wallowing in guilt is not healthy, we can repent and turn back to God. When He forgives, He forgives. He doesn't keep bringing it back up again. Our sin has been removed as far as the east is from the west. There's freedom!

But what does it look like? Very simply, Jesus said:

*“If you love me, you will obey me”.*  
*(John 14:15)*

There're many other scriptures that say the same thing: love for God is shown in our obedience to God. And the beauty of this is that obedience is not at all burdensome (1 John 5:3). We may be deceived into thinking otherwise, but the truth is that there is freedom and blessing in obedience. As Jesus says:

*“Blessed...are those who hear the word of God and obey it”.*  
*(Luke 11:28)*

And when we are obedient to God, as it says in our prayer, we seek to “...**worthily magnify Your Holy Name**...”, because obedience is frequently public. And public obedience to God's commandments brings Him glory.

Perhaps the most telling of this public obedience is seen in the very act of forgiveness for another human being. One author has said: “we are never more like our heavenly Father than when we forgive someone” (John MacArthur, *The Pillars of Christian Character*, p. 85). And that's absolutely true, isn't it? As it says in our text today, “forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Col 3:13b). That's really hard at times, isn't it? But it's without doubt the most loving thing we can ever do for one another.

Before I close, I'd like to point out just a couple of very sobering points that we need to consider. I borrowed the title of this sermon from the title of a very short but powerful book by Francis Schaeffer: “*The Mark of the Christian*”. I love this book and have returned to it many times...

Francis Schaeffer makes 2 basic points in this book. The first is that Jesus actually gave permission to the world for it to judge us based on our visible love for one another. Jesus says:

*“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. **By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another**”.*  
*(John 13:34-35)*

This is a special love that is to be shown and exhibited between believers. It does not erase or negate the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. To the contrary, the weight of the command to love all people as ourselves actually strengthens the command for Christians to love one another in a special, public way. In fact, for Christians to love one another to the exclusion of their non-believing neighbor, as Schaeffer says, is nothing less than ugly.

The point here, though, is that the world has been given permission – by Jesus Himself – to conclude that I am not a Christian if I fail to love my fellow Christian.

*“... all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”.*

And when I fail to show myself as a Christian to a watching world, I fail my Lord. I dishonor Him. I make Him out to be a liar. I don't know about you, but that's a scary and sobering thought. I certainly never want to come across to anyone that I have denied my Lord.

The other point that Schaeffer makes is what he terms “the final apologetic”. That is, we cannot expect the world to believe that the Father sent the Son, that Jesus' claims are true, and that Christianity is true, unless the world sees some reality of the oneness of true Christians. In Jesus' high priestly prayer, Jesus prays:

*“I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me”.*  
(John 17:20-21)

Is that not truly frightening? Without true Christians loving one another and demonstrating true Christian unity, Jesus says the world **cannot** be expected to listen, even when we give all the proper answers.

The most obvious expression of this love and unity is found in the public expression of forgiveness. A genuine, loving, forgiving spirit among true believers is a powerful testimony to a watching world, because it's not a part of their world. It's not natural. It's a supernatural grace.

Are there any of us here today who is harboring a root of bitterness against somebody else? Especially against another believer? We need to get rid of it and forgive one another. We've all experienced someone refusing to extend forgiveness to us, haven't we? What an ugly thing it is. It's so easy to hold on to bitterness as though it was something we can cling to in order to have a hold over someone else. It's *so* destructive! I know I've had my struggles with this, particularly in a rather unpleasant – if not brutal – work environment. But we have to let it go. God is quite capable of taking care of these things in His own time and in His own way.

But it's not easy...which, in conclusion, is why we pray: “through Christ our Lord, Amen”. Because we can't do it on our own strength. We need His and He gives it freely. We can do nothing of godly value apart from Him (John 15:5). However, we can do all things through Christ, who gives us the strength (Phil 4:13).

May each of us continue to abide in Him, look to Him for all wisdom, and receive His strength to live in this world until the day we are received into glory.

In the Name of Jesus Christ, may He bless each of you abundantly.

Amen.