

STRONG to serve**† set free from sin (vv.15-18)****† wrapped up in righteousness (vv.19-23)**

In the name of Jesus, *“our righteousness, holiness and redemption”* (1 Corinthians 1:30), dearly redeemed:

How far would you travel to school? Riding the bus into town for 7th and 8th grade was over forty-five minutes each way for me and my siblings. Nearly two hours on the bus each day didn't leave much time for anything else. It was actually easier in grade school to walk or bike a mile to school – except for the day our teachers met us at the door and sent us right back home again. Was that the Great Alaskan Earthquake and Tsunami of 1964? The hardest trip for me was 1500 miles by plane. Dad and my older brother Roc left me over night at the Flamingo Hotel to catch the shuttle to the Portland International Airport next morning. My first flight finally had me over Montana when I really got scared. “Who will I meet at the Bismarck *International Airport?*” Praying, I thought, “The Lord got me this far. He'll take me the rest of the way.” As they rolled the steps up to the plane and I walked across the tarmac to the single terminal door, I was laughing at myself. *International Airport?* Finding the Dean and students for the two-hour ride to Mobridge, SD, began my freshman year at the nearest WELS high school at the time.

Aren't you glad we have two WELS high schools right here in the Twin Cities? New Life belongs to the association of congregations supporting Saint Croix Lutheran High School in West Saint Paul. In the next few weeks you'll hear more about their ministry initiative: **STRONG to serve**. For our faith education today the Holy Spirit teaches us that we are **STRONG to serve** because we are...

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The Lord's Apostle Paul must of have felt as if he were trying to teach a class of sophomores. Our teachers told us “sophomore” means “wise fool.” I guess we acted that way sometimes. Paul is fielding sophomoric questions still asked by people today. He just spent five chapters showing how *“there is no one righteous, not even one.”* (3:10) Each of us desperately needs a Savior. God's love provided His own Son Jesus Christ to give us credit for His righteousness in heaven. *“But now a righteousness from God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”* (3:21-24) Isn't that the sweetest thing you ever heard?

As a 7th grader I first heard WELS pastors preach this sweet Gospel. Pastors like Bill Bernhardt you see in the *WELS Connection* videos drove over the mountains to preach in my uncle's living room. Others at Lutheran Bible Camp told us what Baptism means for our daily lives: *“We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”* Baptism connects us to Christ's death and to His resurrection like a credit card from a wealthy relative. I cashed in during my parents divorce when my Lutheran high school teachers comforted my soul: *“You are not under law, but under grace.”* (6:4,14)

Now sophomores ask Paul: *“Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?”* Echoes of Christian churches today, sadly many of them calling themselves “Lutheran”! They claim God's forgiveness means divorce on demand, remarriage or living together unmarried, and changing the definition of marriage from what God ordained and natural law too. We shake our heads sadly, but dear friends, breaking the Sixth Commandment is no worse than breaking the Third. Some despise marriage, others despise preaching and God's Word. Slavery to sin can mean the habit of skipping church, making the rest of your life your god. Serving sin can end only one way: *“The wages of sin is death....”*

My love for our Lutheran schools doesn't change the fact that I had some really dedicated public school teachers too. The summer before 6th grade, they offered a Marine Biology class with a final field trip to Seal Island. We hurried out in our tennis shoes over slippery rocks, looked around awhile, until the teachers were getting nervous. They hurried us back as the tide was rushing in – more water, less rocks! It was scary. But imagine if some kids hid out on the island. No parents, food, warm bed?

Don't turn your back on God's Word and destroy your soul. Paul keeps pleading for us not to be "wise fools," but truly wise in God's ways: *"Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? Thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."*

That's why I'm so happy to see you and your loved ones at church. The tide is rushing in. The rocks are disappearing under the rising surf. But you're safe with Jesus, **Set free from sin**. No longer shackled by chains of guilt and desire. Don't look back. Be like us kids running away from Seal Island, back to our Father in heaven. His loving Word and Holy Communion make you **STRONG to serve**. When God's got your back, it's easy to give Him your heart. He makes you glad and willing, all...

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Parents and teachers know why Paul writes: *"I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves."* In other words, "I'd love to give you a lesson about flying high in God's grace, but you're not even off the ground in spiritual things." Before you came to faith in Jesus, you were lost by nature. Hollywood wants you to sin by watching others. Before TVs they had pagan temples with X-rated performances. But sin never satisfies. It always wants more. Loving money, sex, power, fame, friends – none can ever satisfy your body or your soul. Paul urges us to transfer that burning desire for evil into an intense drive for life with God. *"Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness."*

One foggy Friday, we just wouldn't let up. "Dad, you promised to take us fishing!" Soon we were out where the mouth of Coos Bay meets the Pacific Ocean. Couldn't see anything, but we could hear the breakers. Suddenly, the tide started rushing out while the water dipped into a deep trough around the buoy where we were fishing. The anchor stuck and wouldn't come out as Dad gunned the rented motor fore and aft. We begged him to cut the rope, then helped pay for the anchor, agreeing not to tell Mom. During those tense moments I kept thinking about my friend Reed Hurst who drowned off a fishing boat. When the tide rushes out to sea, you can't swim against it. I just wanted to get home.

You're there, when you're here with Jesus. **Wrapped up in righteousness** which He gives as a free gift of grace, everything is different. You can fall in love hundreds of times with your spouse because God loves you and forgives you and teaches you to do the same for others, starting at home. You can marry your best friend, then live like soul mates because God's Word makes us **STRONG to serve** – like our wedding text: *"Through love serve one another."* (Galatians 5:13 ESV) The blame games ends and holiness begins to shine. Practice repentance on your knees. Enjoy God's forgiveness together in grace.

God rescued us from so much trouble! *"When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness."* Good was not on your radar. *"What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!"* "Don't go back there!" says Paul. The worst death is hell. *"Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* **Wrapped up in righteousness** like a warm blanket from God, you're **Strong to serve** powered by grace. That's why I'm so glad that Jesus died for me and so grateful to God for our WELS schools that teach kids the wonders of God's grace at an early age. Give God your best. With His big, loving heart you'll always find you can't outgive the Giver. Amen.