

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. David Mahsman

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday, June 27, 2026, at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, June 28, 2026, at 9:00 a.m.

“Do You ‘Got to Be Good’?”

Romans 7:1-13

Okay, I’m going to show my age.

Does anyone here remember a song, “Last Kiss”? It was written and recorded in 1961 by someone named Wayne Cochrane. That was before my time—at least as someone who was listening to pop music on the radio. But that isn’t important. it doesn’t matter. The record was a flop.

A cover was released in August 1964 by J. Frank Wilson and the Cavaliers. That WAS in “my time,” and I remember it well.

There was another cover recording in 1999. To me, that’s recent. To many of you, it’s ancient history. But you might know it if you’re over 40. It was a version recorded by the grunge-rock band Pearl Jam.

Bear with me. There’s a point to all this.

The song is about a young man who takes his girl out on a date in his daddy’s car. As he’s driving, there’s a stalled car that he sees too late to stop. He swerves, crashes, and his girlfriend dies after he gives her one last kiss. It’s a sad song. But what has always struck me is the regular refrain of the young man—and no, I won’t be singing it:

“Well, where oh where can my baby be?

The Lord took her away from me

She’s gone to heaven, so I got to be good

So I can see my baby when I leave this world.”

Here’s my question:

Do You “Got to Be Good”?

!. Do you “got to be good” to see your loved ones again in heaven? Do you “got to be good” to have eternal life?

Well, it probably goes without saying that pop songs are probably not the best place to get our theology. They’re not the best place to learn about God and our relationship to Him.

But the idea that we can get into God’s good graces by how we live or what we do isn’t foreign to how many people think.

More than 50 years ago, I was part of an evangelism team at Trinity Lutheran Church in Decatur. We were using a modified version of something called “Evangelism Explosion,” an approach to evangelism developed by Dr. D. James Kennedy. So, it was also called the Kennedy method.

If that doesn’t ring a bell, maybe you’ve heard the two questions that evangelism teams would ask people they visited. One was, “If you were to die

tonight, do you believe you would go to heaven?" The other question was, "If you were to die tonight and stand before God, and He asked you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven,' what would you tell Him?"

The most typical answer to the first question was, "Well. I hope I would go to heaven." And to why God should let you into heaven, most often we heard, "Well, I try to do the best I can." And they hoped that would be good enough.

That's the sort of natural human thinking that Paul addresses in our text.

In Chapter 6, Paul says that we were all at one time "slaves to sin." In Chapter 7, Paul uses marriage as an analogy to help explain what happened to us when God gave us the gift of faith in Jesus Christ.

He says we were once married to the Law. And the Law is a harsh husband. This husband demands perfection—our best is never good enough. He points out our every flaw. Our natural inclination is to try to use the Law—rules, morality, good deeds—to save ourselves. But this cruel husband is never satisfied.

But when we were baptized into Christ, Paul says (Chapter 6), we died to the Law. Now, we're no longer married to the Law, but to Christ.

II. What does this mean from a practical standpoint? How do we now relate to the Law as Christians?

You might remember from catechism class that one use of the Law is to show us our sin. Paul writes that "if it had not been for the law, I would not have

known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet’” (v. 7).

Have you ever had the experience of sitting in your living room, or your family room, and the sun comes shining through the window at just the right angle to show you all the dust on your furniture? Suddenly, you think, “Wow, this house is filthy!” God’s Law shows us the dirt in our lives.

The more we study the Law and honestly examine our own lives in light of God’s Law, the more we are aware of just how sinful we are. We begin to realize that there’s really nothing we can do to be good enough when the standard is God’s Law.

It can be painful. But that’s good.

We think of pain as bad. We want to avoid it. I certainly do. But pain serves a good purpose.

There’s actually a rare genetic condition called Congenital Insensitivity to Pain, or CIP. People with this condition have no pain receptors; they can’t feel physical pain. This is actually a life-threatening disability. Because they don’t feel burns, cuts, or bruises, children with CIP often accidentally self-mutilate by biting their own tongues, lips, or fingers. Life-threatening conditions like appendicitis or a heart attack can go entirely unnoticed until they become a matter of life or

death. Unnoticed broken bones can lead to permanent joint deformities and loss of mobility. Those are some of the serious problems that pain helps us to avoid.

The Law is our spiritual pain receptor. It says there's something seriously wrong with us. And it tells us that we can't get rid of the pain by ourselves. Heart attacks and serious diseases don't heal themselves. Left untreated, they are deadly.

The Law is a mirror that shows us our sin. It shines a light on the dirt in our lives. The pain of the guilt and regret that the Law causes tells us that something is very wrong with us. Lots of images. Here's one more: The Law is a taskmaster that makes demands that we can't accomplish.

This can lead to despair on the one hand or self-righteousness on the other. If it leads to despair over never being good enough for God, we can just give up on God. For some others, there's self-righteousness, like the Pharisees in Jesus' day. We might think we are good enough because others are so much worse than us.

Satan doesn't care which of these two traps we fall into, as long as we don't turn to the only true hope that we have.

III. That hope, of course, is Jesus Christ.

In our liturgy, we admit that we are powerless against sin, that we are poor, miserable sinners, who are "by nature sinful and unclean," and that we have sinned against God by thought word, and deed.

Then, we hear the Good News: “In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for His sake forgives us all our sins.”

Paul writes, “But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code” (v. 6).

Paul is saying that we have died to the Law, so the Law no longer defines our relationship with God. That does not mean that the Law is bad and only the Gospel is good. The Gospel is certainly good, but the Law reveals God’s will for how we are to live. It does not reveal how, as believers in Jesus, we will be judged.

It’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking that to be saved, we have to be good enough, that we need to root out sin from our lives.

In Christ, it’s not about us being good enough. Jesus is good enough. Jesus is perfectly good and has paid the penalty for our sins.

We all still struggle against sin, and we should, because freedom from the Law does not give us license to sin. In the verses right after our text, Paul makes this struggle very personal in words that we’ve heard before, that apply to all of us, and that I, personally, find very meaningful: “I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (vv. 18b, 19). Then he goes on to say, “Wretched

man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (vv. 24, 25a).

Even though we still struggle, the war against our sinful nature is already won. Our salvation isn’t based on what we do, but on what Jesus has done for us.

We no longer have to obey God’s Law to be saved. Now, we obey God BECAUSE we are saved. Loving God and loving our neighbor is a gift of the Holy Spirit that comes with the faith He has given us—faith in Christ, which frees us from the demands of the Law.

The Law is still a mirror to show us our sin, but it’s also a guide to living God’s way, but without the Law hanging over us like a gun to our heads.

Do you “got to be good” to live with God forever? No, because even though we cannot meet the demands of God’s Law, Jesus was good—Jesus was perfect—Jesus met those demands in our place. And through God’s gift of saving faith, our heavenly Father now sees us as good and perfect, too, so that we are assured a glorious eternity with Him

Amen.