

## ***Seeing our Sin in Light of Jesus' Sacrifice***

Hebrews 9:11-14

When I was in college, contemporary Christian music was in its infancy. There weren't very many Christian recording artists: Larry Norman, Keith Green, Second Chapter of Acts, and a few others. I started listening to Christian music (along with Bob Seger and Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen). I thought it was so good that I loaned a cassette tape to one of my roommates at LSU. His comment was, "It's all about the same thing: Jesus and the cross and the resurrection." That wasn't a compliment, but it was rather insightful. Jesus' death and resurrection are the "main thing" in the Christian faith. They are at the core of what we believe and therefore what we think about.

We are teaching through the book of Hebrews. Over and over the author writes about the death and exaltation of Jesus. That's because his main challenge in chapter 12 will be, "...let us run the race with endurance, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." Specifically he wants us to be preoccupied with Jesus as our great high priest who presented Himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for sin.

Today's passage (Hebrews 9:11-14) prompts us to fix our eyes on Jesus in a specific way: to fix our eyes on Jesus' sacrifice and then view our sin accordingly, to see our sin in light of Jesus' sacrifice. If we don't view our sin in light of Jesus' sacrifice, we tend to go to one of two extremes. At one extreme, some people feel condemned and paralyzed by their sin; they basically think, "Because of my sin I'm no good to God or anybody else." I've talked to a lot of Christians who basically believe this - that they're worthless to God and to others. At the other extreme some people minimize the reality of sin in their lives. They think, "Sin really isn't really a problem for me. I may mess up sometimes, but everybody does." This person is often the proverbial bull in a china shop. Instead of a humble recognition of sin, this person exudes pride.

Our passage today shows us how to avoid these extremes. Because of Jesus' sacrifice we can face our sin honestly without condemnation. Hebrews 9:11-14 makes a series of extraordinary statements about Jesus' sacrifice that can fundamentally change the way we view our sin. This passage makes three statements about Jesus' sacrifice; each of these statements has implications for how we think about our own sin.

My encouragement this morning is to take Hebrews 9:11-14 very personally (as opposed to impersonally). Instead of viewing Jesus' sacrifice in some abstract way, you are supposed to think and believe, "Jesus' sacrifice has permanently and decisively paid for **my** sin." This way of thinking and believing can change the way you live your life. Let's consider these three statements.

***Jesus (as a high priest) entered through the "greater and more perfect tabernacle."*** (Hebrews 9:11) The first ten verses of the chapter explain that the tabernacle in the old covenant had two fundamental limitations. First, only the high priest (and nobody else) could enter into the most holy place. Second, its sacrifices had to be repeated year after year because they didn't deal with sin in any permanent way. By contrast, the author writes this in verse 11:

11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, *He entered* through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation;

As we've seen throughout Hebrews, the old testament looked forward to "the good things to come" (e.g., the fulfillment of everything promised to Abraham, the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31, etc.). Christ appeared as a high priest to deliver these "good things." In securing these good things, Jesus didn't merely enter into the earthly tabernacle. We saw back in chapter 8 that Jesus actually didn't qualify to be a priest on earth because He wasn't a Levite; He was from the tribe of Judah.

Rather, Jesus entered through "the greater and more perfect tabernacle" which was "not made with human hands." This description echoes what Stephen said in Acts 7:48 when he said that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands. . ." God doesn't live in a house; a building cannot contain Him. Here the author reiterates that Jesus entered through the greater, heavenly tabernacle into the very presence of God. The earthly temple was merely a replica of the heavenly. At the end of chapter 9 (in verses 23 and 24) the author makes a similar point.

23 Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. 24 For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a *mere* copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us;

The point is that Jesus literally couldn't get any closer to God or enter into a deeper place with God to address our sin. This truth may be very familiar to you, but we should never let get over the fact that ***Jesus addressed our sin in the very presence of God.*** This would be analogous to an attorney saying, "I argued and won a case before the Supreme Court"; in this country once you've won a case there, you don't need to (and you can't) go anywhere else higher or deeper into our legal system. In a similar way, you don't need to (and you can't) go anywhere higher or deeper to have your sin addressed. Jesus has addressed our sin in the very presence of God.

At some time this coming week your sin will probably be staring you in the face - whether it's anger, impatience, jealousy, a lack of self-control, lust, or greed. If you trust in Jesus alone for salvation, you can look at that sin and think (or say), "Jesus addressed my sin in the very presence of God. Because He addressed sin there, I can still draw near with confidence to God to receive the grace and mercy I need" (Hebrews 4:16). Seeing your sin in light of Jesus' sacrifice will keep you from withdrawing from God.

***Jesus entered through the "once for all" sacrifice of "His own blood."*** (Hebrews 9:12) Notice how the author continues in verse 12:

12 and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.

Here “blood” signifies that a death has occurred; a life has been given on behalf of another. In the old covenant the high priest would sacrifice an animal in the outer court and then carry the blood into the holy of holies and present it to God. In the new covenant Jesus’ death on the cross (where He shed His blood) was the sacrifice that allowed Jesus to enter into the presence of God (the holy place) “once for all.”

Down in verses 25 and 26 the author reiterates that Jesus’ sacrifice was a once-for-all event that accomplished what the blood of goats and bulls never could.

25 nor was it that He would offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood that is not his own. 26 Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

The fact that the high priest in the old covenant had to enter the holy place year after year meant that last year’s sacrifice wasn’t a permanent solution to the problem of sin. By contrast, Jesus only needed to sacrifice Himself once. He didn’t need to die on the cross year after year because His sacrifice in 30 a.d. “put away sin” decisively.

The result is that ***Jesus removed our sin permanently, securing our eternal redemption.*** When you “redeem” something you buy it back; whatever you have redeemed is now your possession (it belongs to you). When the author of Hebrews says that Jesus has secured our “eternal redemption,” it means that we belong to Him eternally. Nobody else can come and claim us for their own. We belong to Jesus throughout all eternity.

This reality should give us courage when we feel guilty or defeated or fearful because of our sin. When we sin (especially in spectacular ways), we tend to wonder, “Am I even saved? How can I claim to be a follower of Jesus when sin is so alive in my life?” This is where doctrine can be a great asset in our walk with God. Our doctrinal statement affirms this:

We believe that Jesus Christ, as our representative and substitute, shed His blood on the cross as the perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins. His atoning death and victorious resurrection constitute the only ground for salvation.

The Scriptures teach that Jesus’ death and resurrection constitute “the only ground for salvation.” Your obedience doesn’t save you; being raised in a Christian home doesn’t save you; going to church doesn’t save you. As important as those things may be, they don’t have the power to take away your sin and give you life. Only the death and resurrection of Christ can do that.

And so when you feel guilty and yucky because you’ve sinned, it’s important to remember the ground of your salvation and eternal redemption. Even when your sin has catastrophic consequences, you go back and fix your eyes on Jesus - not on

yourself. When you are once again preoccupied with Jesus - His life, death, and resurrection - you see that He “entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.” You take great courage that He has permanently dealt with your sin and that you belong to God permanently.

None of this implies that obedience doesn't matter; it absolutely matters, but not because it saves you. Obedience matters because it's one of the core ways that we love God.

***Jesus' sacrifice cleanses the human conscience.*** (Hebrews 9:13-14) Once again the author makes a contrast between the effect of sacrifices under the old covenant and the effect of Jesus' sacrifice in the new:

13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh,<sup>14</sup> how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Verse 13 reflects the fact that sacrifices under the old covenant primarily made people ceremonially clean so that they could approach God in worship. He mentions “the ashes of a heifer” - which is a reference to a rather elaborate ceremony described in Numbers 19. They would lead an unblemished red heifer outside the camp, slaughter it, and burn it until nothing was left except ashes. They next mix the ashes of the red heifer with water. This mixture was could be sprinkled on people to purify people were ceremonially unclean (e.g. those who had touched a corpse). The author points out in verse 13 that such rituals in the old covenant “sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh.” Such rituals had their place, but they only dealt with defilements of the flesh.

By contrast, the author asks, “how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit [the Holy Spirit] offered Himself without blemish to God, ***cleanse your conscience*** from dead works to serve the living God?” This is the familiar “how much more” logic that we see throughout the book of Hebrews. If the old covenant sacrifices were effective for cleansing the flesh ***how much more*** will the blood of Christ cleanse your conscience?

The human conscience is that internal awareness of right/wrong, good/evil, morality/immorality. A person's conscience can be seared (1 Timothy 4:2); the person is insensitive to right and wrong. A person's conscience can be weak (1 Corinthians 8:7); the person is overly sensitive to things like whether certain foods are permissible to eat. But a person's conscience can also be cleansed (and therefore good). The author of Hebrews says that the sacrifice of Jesus cleanses the conscience from dead works (works that leads to death. . . i.e. sins). When your sins have been cleansed, you can now stand before God without guilt and shame. [Paul was able to say, “I serve God with a clear conscience” (2 Timothy 1:13).]

This is a unique blessing that those before Christ didn't experience. Back in verses 9 and 10 the author had written this:

9 . . . Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience,<sup>10</sup> since they *relate* only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation.

But the sacrifice of Jesus **does** make the worshiper perfect in conscience. This doesn't mean that a believer never sins; a believer's conscience is often convicted of sin. But the sacrifice of Jesus allows us to stand before God without condemnation and shame because our sin has been washed away. The result is that ***We are now free to serve the living God!*** Everybody ultimately serves somebody. Unless you are God, not having a master isn't an option. There's a sense in which "whoever has the best master has the best life."

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, ***you are now free to serve the living God*** - the God who is alive and who can act on our behalf. In the old covenant, only a few people could be priests and serve God in the temple. But under the new covenant we all have full, free access to God. If you are a believer in Jesus, you have been given a spiritual gift(s) that gives you a specialized ministry in the body of Christ. We periodically offer a course called *Network* that can help you identify your spiritual gifting (e.g., administration, mercy, giving, encouragement, leadership, etc.).

As a pastor, I don't think I could function without this knowledge that ***Jesus' sacrifice cleanses my conscience so that I am now free to serve the living God.*** Sometimes when my sin is staring me in the face, I have condemning thoughts like many of you. I have thoughts like, "You're a sorry excuse for a Christian, much less a pastor," and "You have no business standing up and teaching the Bible," and "You are such a hypocrite that you should just give up." I hope it doesn't shock you too much to know that I have such thoughts. But it's the truth. But I'm also happy to say that there are people in my life who regularly remind me that my adequacy is not my obedience or my giftedness or my anything. My adequacy as a pastor (and as a husband and a father and a friend and a brother) is found in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on my behalf. Because He has cleansed my conscience in the presence of God, I am now free to serve Him.

Of course, the same thing is true of you. I plead with you to take this very, very personally. Instead of thinking in an abstract way, "Jesus cleanses the human conscience so that people are free to serve God," you need to understand and believe, "Jesus' sacrifice cleanses ***my*** conscience so that ***I*** am now free to serve the living God." You will either fix your eyes on Jesus and experience freedom, or you will fix your eyes on your sin and be paralyzed by guilt and shame.

In *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Philip Yancey tells a true story that took place in Boston in 1990. I think this story puts into perspective everything we've seen in Hebrews 9. A couple reserved space at the downtown Hyatt for their wedding reception. The bill totaled \$13,000 – which they had to pay up front. Shortly before the wedding, the groom got "cold feet" and broke off the relationship. The ex-bride-to-be couldn't get a refund, so she "faced two choices: eat the loss with no party, or throw a party despite the awful turn of events."

She decided to do something that nobody anticipated. It turns out that this woman had previously lived on the streets of Boston as well as in a homeless shelter before getting her life back in order. Her experience gave her the idea of blessing a population in Boston that most people overlook:

And so it was that in June of 1990 the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston hosted a party such as it had never seen before. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken – ‘in honor of the groom,’ she said – and sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters. That warm summer night, people who were used to peeling half-gnawed pizza off the cardboard dined instead on chicken cordon bleu. Hyatt waiters in tuxedos served hors d’oeuvres to senior citizens propped up by crutches and aluminum walkers. Bag ladies, vagrants, and addicts took one night off from the hard life on the sidewalks outside and instead sipped champagne, ate chocolate wedding cake, and danced to big-band melodies late into the night.

Yancey points out that this event reminds us of the parable Jesus told about a man who threw a party but nobody came. So his servants went out into the streets inviting anybody who’d come. That’s a picture of the Kingdom. You and I never deserved to be at the banquet, but we have been invited anyway. It is only because of Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice that you and I can feast in the presence of God eternally. When we sin and when we feel guilt and shame, the last thing we should do is run from God. No, we remember that we have never been worthy in ourselves. We fix our eyes on Jesus. And because of His sacrifice on our behalf we experience new freedom to serve the living God.