

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“Sin, Guilt & Our Savior”

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Hebrews 9:24-10:3

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The preacher who preached the sermon that is now known as the book in the Bible called Hebrews makes an assumption about his audience. It is assumed that you care about sin. That's why there is so much talk in here about priests and temples and sacrifices, especially sacrifices. Much of what was happening at the temple was about making right what was wrong and about making appeasement to a God whom you had displeased by your actions, your thoughts, the way you treated other people, the way you reacted to the way they treated you. So much talk about sin because people cared about it. Hebrews assumes you care about it, too. It is assumed that the fact that you have sin in your life (which you do) troubles you and you'd like to make it right and you'd like to get the sin out of your life. So, in other words, you'd like to be right with God and live right from this point out. This is an assumption on which the teachings of Hebrews are based. And of course, it's right, mostly.

As it has been said, sin is a theological achievement. To name something as sin, rather than wrongdoing, mistake, error in judgment, regrettable action, recent unpleasantness or miscalculation, is to understand it as something that displeases God, not just produces unhappy results. And further, it is to locate the action as something that not only displeases God, but is subject to judgment by God. Because sin has consequences, to name something as sin is to see it with utmost seriousness.

I'm not sure that everything a person does wrong is a sin. If I take a wrong turn on my way to your house for dinner and it delays my arrival by a few minutes, I think that's a mistake due an apology. Not a sin to be confessed. If I unintentionally give you wrong information to a question you ask me, I think that's an unfortunate error to be corrected, but I don't think it's a sin to be confessed. The difference isn't just in degree. It's not just that these examples are peccadilloes and not worthy of too much consternation as it is that the category of sin is serious and worthy of serious reflection. We do care about it. The preacher of Hebrews is right.

You do care about sin. Now, truth be told, sometimes you care more about other people's sin than your own. You'd like them to live right and stop sinning and for them to care more about why they are sinning. You are tired of dealing with it hurting you and other people. You are tired of them saying they are a Christian and then going out and doing stuff that's not very Christian (in your opinion). As a matter of fact, you care a lot about sin—at least other people's!

We care about it enough that we talk about it a lot in church. Sometimes church can seem like all it does is fret over sin, such that Sundays become sledgehammers beating down on people who already feel unworthy. And I'll confess, this is kind of fun preaching. It's fun because you get to feel powerful—telling people how bad they are. And they pretty much have to sit there and listen. They could get up and leave, but the reality is that if you preach about how sinful people are, you get two responses. And you

are guaranteed to get them. The first response is from the person who is sure you aren't talking about him or her and is really happy that you ARE talking about all those other sinners. That's the head-nodder. That's the cheerleader who says, "Go get 'em preacher." Tell 'em how bad they are!

The second response is the head-hanger who knows you are talking about him or her like you've been rummaging around in his or her closet. That's why when you really preach about sin, you can be sure you are hitting someone close to the heart. It's kind of like the supposed-medium who can supposedly speak to the dead. You know, it's a pretty sure business, "I can feel the presence of someone here, someone's dad who died, G, G, Jerry . . . no, George, no Gary." "My father's name was Gary!" Wow! How did he do that?!? So, friend, you are a sinner—both you head-hangers and you head-nodders. How'd I know that? Because you are still breathing. You are a sinner, and I believe you care about that.

And the preacher of Hebrews knew the same about his audience, but they had a practice in place to take care of all that, supposedly. Every year, the high priest would go into the Temple on the Day of Atonement, the high and holy moment, and would pray to God for the forgiveness of those sinners. All the sacrifices, all the prayers, all year led up to this moment. It was like the reset button for the nation. And the next year, he would do it again. And the next year he would do it again. And the next year he would do it again. And again. And again. And again. It was the way sins were understood to be forgiven, and all made right with God. In a way, it's like a record player that spins around and around playing the same song each year. And church can be like that, playing the same song each week. You are a sinner, and the most you wretched loser can hope for in life is to be forgiven for your terrible sins.

Of all the things Jesus did as a teacher, a healer, a miracle-worker, a prophet, a rabbi, He never did that. He never entered that part of the temple. Not one time. He wouldn't have been allowed. He wasn't a priest, because He wasn't of the tribe of Levi, who were the priests. He was of the tribe of Judah, who were the kings. But He wasn't one of those either. He was a carpenter, a teacher, a healer, miracle worker, prophet, rabbi who stirred up enough trouble by teachings that made the Roman empire seem like a dim shadow compared to the Kingdom of God and the Temple of Jerusalem like a pile of crumbling stones compared to the throne room of heaven. He talked about the comfortably generous rich unfavorably compared to little old ladies who gave everything they had. He talked about Moses and Elijah like He was talking to them. He called God His Father. He looked at very religious people who had long, flowing robes that showed how important they were and prayed long prayers that showed how righteous they were and He called them things like unwashed tombs. Kind of like saying someone is a bag of bones. He basically attacked everything that was in the system, everything high, everything powerful, everything that could have been working for good for God and wasn't—not the ways of the true God. And all of this gets Him in sufficient trouble that they wanted to get rid of Him and so they did. In disgrace. As much disgrace as they could conceive. So the cross was supposed to be the disgraceful end to an embarrassing sideshow in the ongoing drama of another would be messianic pretender. Far from being a high priest Himself, Jesus was condemned by the high priest.

So Hebrews has all of this in mind. It pictures a lonely, disgraceful cross outside of town, forces us to look at it, real close, to look at the blood pouring down. I know that's an uncomfortable image, but there was always blood in sacrifice. In a great reversal of perspective, Hebrews says see that blood, that's not disgrace, that is salvation.

And see Him dying there on the side of the road. That's not disgrace, that is Jesus entering the real Holy of Holies, not the one built by hands up there on the hill, the one in heaven, the one that is merely copied or foreshadowed by the one built by human hands, that's Jesus entering the true holy place not with a sacrifice of another poor creature, but with His own blood. What you have been seeing the high priest do year after year is just a foreshadowing of what Christ is doing in heaven once for all time. They have to do it every year. Christ does it once. One time. Once for all. When, on the cross, Jesus said, "It is finished." He meant a lot more than just His too-short life on earth. He meant a lot more than that.

He meant his work was complete. It is finished.

He meant that everything that kept you away from God. It is finished.

He meant that all the appeals from all the sacrifices for all the sins of all the people had come to full effect in Him in this moment. On the cross. In the heavenly Holy of Holies. It is finished.

He meant your guilt and the sin that entangles you and keeps you from being who you really are. It is finished. You really are free to live.

It is finished, and it is just beginning. When your life has been covered by the grace of God, you are free to begin living a new kind of life, a life unleashed to be lived pursuing your full potential as a child of God. You are free to love unconditionally, to forgive amazingly, to serve radically, to surrender deeply. The Christian life is about leaving behind the sin that so easily entangles us and going on to the spiritual growth God has in store for us. Hebrews has already chastised the audience for still needing milk when they should be well on to solid food.

And many of us, maybe all of us, fall in that category. We are still spiritual babies, when God has given us the opportunity to be spiritual giants. There is a path to deep knowledge and experience of God. The invitation is offered far and wide, but it is apparently a narrow path. The monastics describe the first step on this path as purification. It is the very practical, very unromantic process of dealing with all that is in our lives that takes us away from God, to be cleansed of all the noise of the world so that we can hear God. And we know that, while God's grace in Christ is the beginning of that work, we also know that it's just hard sometimes to get off the treadmill of repetitive sin and start really living.

And maybe that's why it's kind of appealing to have a sermon, or week after week of sermons pounding on our heads—you are sinners. To hear that is to hear the deepest, darkest truth of ourselves. And it's kind of nice to be honest.

Several years ago on an icy, snowy, slushy afternoon, I approached a red light and did not apply my brakes quickly enough. By the time I applied them, it was too late, my car, a blue 1991 Jeep Cherokee—my favorite car I've ever owned—slammed into the

back of the car in front of me and pushed it across the intersection. I had two little kids in the backseat and a pile of cinder blocks in the rear. Fortunately, no one was hurt. The policeman came and gave me a ticket for excessive speed. I wasn't breaking the speed limit, but if you hit someone, by definition you are going excessively fast, I guess. So I heard that if you go to court, the judge will throw out the ticket or at least give you a reduced fine. I was in no mood to pay \$90 in addition to the inevitable rise in my insurance plus the repairs on my own car. So when the day came, I showed up at the courthouse. And waited. And waited. Hebrews talks about a day Christ will come to save those who eagerly await Him. I don't know how eager I was, but I was waiting for salvation from this ticket. My case—I couldn't believe I had a 'case'—was called. I stepped forward. And the judge perched on his lofty bench looked down, "How do you plead?" I had thought about this a lot. It was my fault I hit the guy, even though I didn't intend to. I hadn't been speeding, but I didn't go slow enough to stop on an icy day. And the guy I hit was sitting in the back of the room. So I replied, probably squeaked out, "Guilty, your honor." And there it was . . . have you ever said in front of someone else, "I'm guilty?" It's a strange sensation. It's like you are naked. To stand there before the third branch of the most powerful government along with your peers and declare your guilt. We could all stand there, of course, every one of us, every day of our lives, before a judge far greater than the municipal traffic court judge of Albemarle County, Virginia: before the Great High Judge, and, were we asked, "How do you plead?" we would have to say "Guilty. I'm guilty. I'm guilty of things done and undone, of things said, and unsaid, of sins intentional and unintentional. Yes, Lord, I stand before you today guilty."

And then what? I'd been told that if you simply go to court, you are off the hook. But to my surprise, the judge said, "\$90 plus court costs. Next." Only later did I learn the missing secret that any lawyer will tell you. You don't plead guilty. You plead "No contest." That's what gets you off. It's not saying you didn't do anything wrong. It's saying you aren't going to admit to doing anything wrong. Those are the magic words. "No contest." If I'd said those words, I'd have walked out with a little more cash in my account.

But I was guilty. I had done it. And I knew it. And I said it. And though the judgment hurt, it felt kind of good to have my conscience cleared. What about the Great High Judge? What about THAT courtroom? When you stand before that judge, and the question asked is "How do you plead for your life? How do you account for your life?" before you can say a word, Christ speaks, "Lord, have mercy. I have been waiting for this one. My sacrifice, my blood, is enough for you. I took care of that a long time ago. Welcome, my beloved child. Your guilt is cleansed. Your sins have been forgiven. You are free. And you have been since the day I died."