

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Hebrews 9:11-15: "What Would You Give for a Clear Conscience?"
March 28/29, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Jesus, in Thy cross are centered
All the marvels of Thy grace;
Thou, my Savior, once hast entered
Through Thy blood the holy place:
Thy sacrifice holy there wrought my redemption,
From Satan's dominion I now have exemption;
The way is now free to the Father's high throne,
Where I may approach Him, in Thy name alone. *Amen.* (ELH 182, v. 8)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the ninth chapter of the Book of Hebrews, beginning at the eleventh verse:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. / Therefore He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, and who still intercedes for us before His Father in heaven, dear fellow redeemed:

You have probably talked with people who pin their troubles and failures in life on one thing. They just can't get past that one thing or let it go. Maybe it is regret that they turned right instead of left when the road ahead branched in two directions. Maybe they are filled with bitterness toward someone who wronged them many years ago. Maybe they think that if they had just stayed with that special individual or pursued that job opportunity, their life would have been much happier and more prosperous.

I suppose the same thoughts have crossed our minds. We think how it would be now if we could just go back and change one thing. The movie *It's a Wonderful Life* plays off that idea. The main character gets the chance to see how things would have been different if he had followed his original plan and not stayed in his hometown. He realizes in the end that he didn't have it so

bad after all. But we don't have that benefit. We can't see how our lives would be without those decisions and experiences. So it is easy to dwell on the past, to live with regret, to carry the burdens of bad choices and sinful actions. What we wouldn't give for a clear conscience!

Well, what would you give? What would you give if you could wipe away the bad memories and the bad decisions? If the stain on your past is bad enough, maybe you would give anything to remove it. You would go broke if it would undo the wrong. You might even endure intense physical pain if it could deliver you a clear conscience.

You don't know what a blessing a clear conscience is until your conscience is troubled. It's like how we are currently wishing we could go about our normal business with no threat of a fast-spreading virus. We wish we could visit family members and friends. We wish we could go back to church! The things we easily took for granted before are much more valuable to us now. That's how it is with the conscience. You don't think much about it until it accuses you, weighs down on you like a heavy burden.

But that doesn't make the conscience bad. It is very important to have a functioning conscience. In fact, our eternal fate depends on it. The conscience functions properly as long as it is guided by God's law. So when a person feels guilt for doing harm to his neighbor through actions or words, his conscience is working properly. The conscience is doing what God intends when any breaking of the Commandments in our thoughts, words, or deeds registers in our mind and heart. We want our conscience to do this, but it is hardly pleasant.

In Psalms 31 and 32, David described the heavy burden of a guilty conscience: *"Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away"* (31:9-10). *"For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer"* (32:3-4). It is no fun to have a guilty conscience. The pressure it applies is intense. But the conscience can be unburdened. And you and I can move beyond the regrets of the past.

The author of the Book of Hebrews explains how. He describes the Old Testament sacrifices which were offered by a priest on behalf of the people. At God's command, the priest purified all things – including himself – with animal blood, with the blood of goats and lambs and calves and bulls. But no amount of sacrifices could cleanse the people from all their sin. How could the offering of earthly things for sin prevail before the God of heaven?

This is why God sent a Lamb from heaven to earth. He sent His eternally-begotten Son, true God with Him and the Holy Spirit. He sent Him to be at the same time a perfect High Priest and a perfect Sacrifice. As High Priest, Jesus *"entered... into the holy places."* The temple with the Holy Place and Most Holy Place was still standing at that time, but Jesus did not enter those places. He entered the holy places of heaven *"by means of his own blood."*

Jesus was a Lamb *"without blemish."* He had perfectly followed His Father's will. He had nothing to be ashamed of, no past transgressions that caused Him regret. Even while He was wrongly accused, beaten, and sent to the cross, He maintained a pure conscience. He let these unjust things happen to Him out of love for us. The cross was the altar on which He was

sacrificed for our sin. That is where the holy Lamb of God was pierced and blood flowed from His wounds.

The author of Hebrews tells us that by His death, Jesus redeemed us from our transgressions committed under God's law. His death means that all our sins which bother our conscience and make us feel guilty—even wrongs committed long ago—are completely atoned for. His blood has made full satisfaction for all our sins.

But hearing those words may not immediately unburden your conscience, especially if you have been carrying a load of guilt for a long time. You know that God does not look at those sins anymore, but you do. You can't clear out the memory of the wrong, the hurt that was caused, the damage that was done. Can you ever hope to have a clear conscience again?

Let's go back to today's text. It says that God's Son took on flesh, so that He could offer Himself in our place. It says that *"by means of His own blood,"* He secured *"an eternal redemption."* With His saving work complete, He returned to *"the holy places"* of heaven. There He sits at the right hand of His Father as *"the mediator of a new covenant."*

A mediator is a go-between, an arbitrator. This person equally represents two sides which are divided. Our sin separated us from God, but Jesus our Mediator brought us back together. He is the perfect Mediator because He is both God and Man. As the inspired letter to Timothy states: *"For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time"* (1Ti. 2:5-6).

Jesus continues to function as our Mediator even now. When we sin, He points His Father to the blood He shed on our behalf. "I poured out My blood for that sin, and that sin, and that sin," He says. "My blood cleanses them from all sin" (1Jo. 1:7). That includes the sins of your past, the ones you still feel guilty about, the ones you would give anything to undo.

There is nothing you can do to make up for those sins. So many people try. They try to bury sin deep. But it always seems to find its way back to the surface. They try to cancel out the bad by doing good. But there is no winning that game, and they know it. Some even hurt themselves or withdraw from others in the hope that by punishing themselves, they can right a wrong. But none of those things work. They all fail.

There is only one path to a clear conscience, and that is Christ. He took your place. He claimed your sin as His own. He offered Himself as the target for your iniquities and misdeeds. He let His Father pour out His righteous wrath against Him. He paid in anguish, suffering, and death for every sin that you and I and the whole world have done.

He shed His blood on the cross to *"purify our conscience."* When He died, we are told that *"the curtain of the temple was torn in two"* (Mat. 27:51, Mar. 15:38, Luk. 23:45). This was the curtain separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. The tearing of this curtain showed that all people now had access to God's throne of grace through Jesus' blood. This includes you. You have access to God's never-changing grace by faith in Jesus. He purifies your conscience from *"dead works,"* from all those attempts to make things right on your own. Only He can grant forgiveness and peace, and that is what He wants you to have.

Your Baptism is a clear testimony of this. Your Baptism was *“an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”* (1Pe. 3:21). Baptism delivered you a cleansed and purified conscience because it joined you to Jesus, whose righteousness is perfect (Heb. 10:22). And in the Lord’s Supper, He continues to bring cleansing for the sins you have committed and repented of, by giving you His body and blood to eat and drink.

So What Would You Give for a Clear Conscience? You don’t need to give anything. Jesus gave Himself for you. His holy blood cleanses you—including your troubled conscience—from all sin. In Jesus, and only in Him, you have a bright future. The road behind you may be covered in darkness and regrets and what-ifs. But the road ahead is illuminated by the light of God’s Word. Jesus leads you forward on this path toward your life’s end. Then He will take you into heaven. There you will not remember your record of sin, and you will live with a pure heart and a clear conscience for all eternity.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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