

ROOM AT THE CROSS

Nailing the Deceit That Slays Us

Text: 1 John 1:5-10

If We Say That We Are Without Sin

I have one simple truth to reflect upon with you tonight and it is this one: We cannot embrace what happened on Good Friday as long as we remain deceived. Ted Turner, the well-known media mogul, once said this about the Cross: "I don't want anybody to die for me. Sure, I've had a few drinks and a few girl friends. But if that's going to put me in hell, then so be it."

On one level, the comment reveals a self-deception about the nature of God's judgment on sin that would be almost comic were it not so terribly tragic and so widespread. To shrug off the idea of eternal separation from God, as if it were a regrettable but tolerable price for doing as one pleases in life, suggests a heart that has lost the ability to see clearly any more.

Were God to turn his face from us for a single instant, the experience would be the most cataclysmic agony we had ever known. This, some believe, is the agony we witness on the cross when Jesus cries out: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" And this He experiences, just for an instant. What, however, would it be to lose God's care and communion for all of eternity? It would be a horror so colossal, that the Bible resorts to images of fiery torture, and teeth-gnashing torment, and the frigid loneliness of the outer darkness of space just to take us to the edge of it. Yet this is the destination for those who cannot see their need of God's grace and renewal.

This, of course, is the second deception. It's not just that some people don't take the hell of separation from God very seriously; it's that the Ted Turner in us doesn't feel a desperate need for the forgiveness of God that preserves our communion with Him. The proof of this is that we are no longer deeply troubled by our sin. We often view impulses like lust and envy as simply forms of red-blooded striving. We frequently think our searing or simmering wrath justifiable. We regard our greed as good, a way of helping the economy. We have grown comfortable with a life of gluttonous consuming and disposing. In fact, those who speak of such impulses as deadly, as leading us toward hell, seem judgmental, fanatical, puritanical at best. Which is why some of us are rejecting this message now.

But here is the reality to which Good Friday points, take it or leave it. It is possible for someone to live with sin for so long that he or she can no longer see the truth. They could actually develop a heart-condition so severe that even when the Great Physician himself came into their midst to offer them the transplant needed to save them, instead of saying "Thank you," they might respond by nailing Him to a Cross. It could happen.

But If We Confess Our Sins

But sometimes, there at the foot of the Cross, God gives someone a glimpse of vision that alters their life forever. Brian Keith Moore was someone like that and he recorded it in a little piece of prose which his parents found with his favorite things a few days after the 18 year-old died in a car crash. I'd like to share the substance of Brian's vision with you...

In that place between wakefulness and dreams, I found myself in a Room. There were no distinguishing features save for one wall covered with banks of drawers—like the ones in old libraries that contain index cards listing titles by author or subject. The files here, however, stretched from floor to ceiling and seemed endless in either direction and the headings on each were unlike any library I'd ever visited. The first to catch my attention was one that read, "People I've Cursed." I opened it and began flipping through the cards, then quickly shut it, shocked to realize that I recognized the names written there.

And then, without being told, I knew where I was. This lifeless Room was a crude cataloging system for my life. Here were written the actions of my every moment, big and small, in a detail my memory couldn't match. A sense of wonder and curiosity, coupled with dread, stirred within me as I began randomly opening files and exploring their contents. Some brought joy and sweet memories; others a sense of shame and regret so intense that I looked over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching. A file named, "Friends", was next to one marked, "Friends I Have Betrayed." I could hardly bare to look.

The titles ranged from the mundane to the outright weird. "Books I Have Read", "Lies I Have Told", "Comfort I Have Given", "Places I Have Gone", "Friends I've Envied", "People I Slandered", "Jokes I Have Laughed At". Some were almost hilarious in their exactness, like: "Words I've Yelled at Others in Traffic." Others I couldn't laugh at like: "Things I've Have Done in Anger."

I never ceased to be surprised by the contents. Often there were many more cards than I expected. Sometimes fewer than I hoped. The sheer volume of the life I had lived was overwhelming. How had I had the time to live each of the moments written on these millions of cards? But each card confirmed the truth. Each card was written in my own handwriting. Each card was signed with my own signature.

When I pulled out the file marked "Objects I've Acquired", I realized the files grew to contain their contents. The cards were packed tightly and yet, after two or three yards, I hadn't found the end of the file. I shut it, shamed, not so much by all the objects listed there but more by the vast amount of time and energy I knew that file represented. How could I have placed so much importance on things instead of people?

When I came to a file marked "Lustful Thoughts", I felt a chill run through my body. I pulled the file out only an inch, not willing to test its size, and drew out a card. I shuddered at its detailed content. I felt sick to think that such a moment had been recorded. More shame entered my soul. An almost animal rage broke on me.; One thought dominated my mind: "No one must ever see these cards! I have to destroy them!"

In an insane frenzy I yanked the file out. Its size didn't matter now. I had to empty it and burn the cards. But as I took it at one end and began pounding it on the floor, I could not dislodge a single card. I became desperate and pulled out a card, only to find it was as strong as steel and would not yield to my tearing. Utterly helpless and defeated, I returned the file to its slot, and leaned my forehead against the wall.

And then I saw it. The title read "People I Have Shared the Gospel With." I pulled on its handle and a box no more than three inches long fell out. I could count the cards it held on one hand. An empty feeling ached in my gut. And then the tears came, in waves of sobs so deep they shook my whole body. The shame was overwhelming. No one must ever, ever know of this Room. No one!

But then, as I pushed away the tears, I saw Him. No! Please, not Him. Not here. Oh, anyone but Jesus! I watched helplessly as He began to open the files and read every card. I couldn't bear to watch His response. I just sat on the floor with my hands over my eyes and mouth. But in the moments I did look at His face, I saw a sorrow deeper than my own. He seemed to go, intuitively, to the worst of the boxes.

I covered my face with my hands and began to sob again. But He walked over, sat down, and put His arm around me.; He could have said so much, but He didn't say a word. Jesus just wept with me. Then He got up and walked back to the files.; Starting at one end of the Room, He took out a file and, with those nail-pierced hands, He began to sign His name over mine on each card. "No! You can't!" I shouted, "Not your pure name on those cards!" But there they all were, written in red so rich, so alive. The name of Jesus covered mine, written with His blood.

I don't think I'll ever understand how He did it so quickly, but in the next instant, it seemed I heard Him close the last file and walk back to my side. He placed His hand on my shoulder, looked deep in my eyes, and spoke three words: "It is finished"¹ He said. Then He helped me up and led me out of the Room. I was hungry to live anew. And far off in the distance, I thought I saw the sun beginning to rise over an empty tomb.

He Is Faithful And Just To Forgive Us

Between the coming dawn and the place where we sit tonight, there stands a Cross. The bulk of people will look up at that Cross and exclaim, "I don't need anyone to die for me." But there will always be a few who stand at that place with a different vision. Maybe they'll picture the sort of Room Brian Moore imagined; perhaps the Great Throne Room described in the Book of Revelation. But either way, they will fall to their knees in humility and gratitude because they know the Truth.

This is how the Apostle John put it, and I pray that we'll take it to heart as we come to this Table: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and [by the blood of Jesus] He will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

Please pray with me...

Lord as we look upon the Cross, give us light to see both ourselves and You with new eyes. Move us to a deeper awareness of what great sinners we've been and what a great Savior you are. Forbid us, Lord, that we should boast, save in Your credit by which redemption comes. Then fill us at this table, Lord. Transplant your life within us. For we pray in the name of Jesus. And all God's people said,
"Amen."

¹John 19:30