

When I've done something wrong and need to apologize to my husband, who is probably the person I wrong most these days since we're together at home so much with Covid, the things I do to try and make amends are to say with my words "I'm so sorry" and show remorse in my body language and with my eye contact. But nearly 50 years of life experience now - come July - I also know before any of that - it has to start with an experience of true repentance in my heart, which is more difficult than the words or body language, am I right? Anyone tracking with anyone here? I try to practice the same actions with any of you or anyone else I wrong.

But what about coming clean with God? What is required of us - and is it different from what was required before Jesus allowed himself to be crucified and was resurrected? This is what I'm going to talk about today in this 5th sermon in the series called "Cross Purposes" understanding the mystery of salvation through the cross.

We know that Jesus bridged the gap for us with God, but HOW exactly did that happen? This is the question of "Atonement" or getting right with God. And there are actually a few different theories of "Atonement" - or "At One-ment" - becoming one with God again - These different theories of Atonement help us think about this work of Jesus on the cross - and many scholars & theologians have written about them over the years.

Pastor Robb talked about four theories in the first four sermons of this series, which I invite you to go back and listen to on our Podcast "St. Paul's Voyager" or watch on Youtube channel. Those first four were - Substitutionary Atonement (this is the most common theory and the one which most fundamental Christian communities insist is the only true theory), but there is also The Ransom Theory, The Moral Influence Theory, The Reconciliation Theory, today I'm talking about The Cleansing Theory and next week I'll preach about one last theory.

Thinking about these different theories of HOW Jesus bridges the gap between us and God can be pretty confusing. To be honest, it's confusing for me and I've been thinking about them for a quite a while. Hopefully listening to this sermon series isn't as painful as a root canal can be - my apologies to any dentists here today/listening. But I do believe it's really important for all believers to know that different theories exist and have been debated by scholars and theologians since the 2nd century CE. And it's important for pastors to teach and preach about them though you might also be using this tonight if you have a hard time falling asleep. I think it was Abraham Lincoln who said "If you took all the people who fell asleep

during sermons and laid them end to end, they would be a lot more comfortable."

Just as sleep is sometimes a mystery - Pastor Robb said in his first sermon - HOW Jesus' death reunites us with God is a mystery of salvation through the cross. I invite you to use your own reasoning and desire that the Holy Spirit to speak to you personally as we consider what the Bible has to say about HOW Jesus makes us clean.

Quite a few places in the Bible talk about sin as a blemish or spot that must be removed with PROPER cleansing and separates us from God's perfection. Notice my emphasis on PROPER cleansing. HOW is one cleansed from this blemish of sin?

Another word for cleanse is expiate, which means making amends or coming clean with someone. A criminal might expiate one's crimes by going to jail or paying a fine. So the cleansing or expiation theory is the idea that we've sinned or committed wrongs against God, which requires expiation or cleansing in order to be right with God once more.

One of the passages in the Bible that talks about this is Psalm 51 verses 1-7. Hear now these words from Dan Shoemaker.

[Read Psalm 51:1-7]

This is a well known and famous passage written by King David as a confession of his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. If you haven't read the story of King David and Bathsheba, I encourage you to take time to read it today. It's found in 2 Samuel chapters 11 & 12. There are many pop culture references made about famous Bible stories like this one you might miss having not read the story yourself. Literature made into movies like Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" or Thomas Hardy's "Far from the Madding Crowd" are two examples based on this story of King David and Bathsheba. Read your Bible like you would any other book every day and if you have a study Bible read from that one, you'll understand much more by looking at the commentary there. If you don't have a study Bible. Invest in one. It's one of the best investments you'll make. If you can't afford one, get in touch with me, I'm sure we have some here who would LOVE to help invest in you that way.

In this passage in Psalm 51, David acknowledges his wrong with Bathsheba. David and provides a sort of template for confession based on the cleansing work of God.

*"Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.... Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Create in me a CLEAN HEART, oh God, and put a new and right spirit within me."*

As Magrey DeVega writes in his book "Savior":

“Whenever we see or read the word “heart” in the Bible, remember that the ancient Israelites understood the heart as the seat of intelligence and emotion, the core of one’s being.”

I said in the beginning that even though I say with my words “I’m sorry” and show remorse with my body language and eye contact, first and foremost I must experience true repentance in my heart or it’s all an act. David said “God you desire truth in the inward being; teach me wisdom in my secret heart.” When David confessed his sins, God graciously forgave him and helped him make things right. Jesus’ death, his work on the cross, IS the hyssop that cleanses us of sin. Not only that, but it created the possibility of a brand new heart and orients us toward a new direction in life. This cleansing work of Jesus is based on an understanding that JESUS is the fulfillment of a Hebrew sacrificial system where a scapegoat was used to take the blame & punishment (death) of the sins of the people.

Have you read any of the book of Leviticus for yourself? Phew - I’d say if I had to pick one book of the Bible that’s hardest to read, I personally would choose Leviticus. The blood images are so difficult to get through. One example is from our second reading from Leviticus 16:11-17. Hear Dan read again for us now:

[Dan reading Leviticus 16:11-17]

See what I mean? In the beginning of my sermon I asked- what is required to come clean with God and is that different from what was required before Jesus allowed himself to be crucified and was resurrected? After hearing this passage in Leviticus, what would you say? Definitely.

We have this table here under the cross - the two focal points in our sanctuary - the table and the cross. Today I’ve placed on the table a chalice and paten - a cup and plate. They signify to me the last supper and Jesus as the bread of life (the plate) and the blood of the new covenant (the cup).

The blood of the NEW covenant - do you recognize that language?

Why is blood needed? Why did Jesus say in John 6:53 “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” If we go just a bit further in Leviticus to chapter 17:11 we read “The life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar.” According to Genesis why is life, which is in the blood, required in order to be at one or reconciled to God? Because of the original sin of the first human who was once in complete, perfect relationship with God - Adam - who God told “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for when you eat of it you will surely die. The wages of sin is death.

Before Jesus - as the people of God - we would not have had a table where all are now welcome, instead there was a bronze

altar, behind a curtain, where once a year on the Day of Atonement only the High Priest was allowed entrance and where even the High Priest had to make blood sacrifices to God for his own sin before he made blood sacrifices for the sins of all the people, which all had to be done in the PROPER way for atonement with God. One of the proper requirements for atonement or cleansing was the blood sacrifice of an unblemished animal to stand in for us - to be the scapegoat - and it had to be done in the Jerusalem Temple only. Blood sacrifice was ended when the 2nd Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. After the destruction of the temple, atonement was not possible - until God’s self came in the form of Jesus to be the last and perfect blood atonement once and for all.

Ok - all this talk of cleansing and blood and sacrifice might be leaving you with more questions than answers and you might be feeling troubled by this understanding of Jesus’ death on the cross and of a God who demands taking life for the saving of humanity. It’s a tough jump to think about this in modern times.

But it’s possible we might all be able to agree with this - we know what it’s like to have stains in our lives that we cannot remove. I do. Our past wrongs at times come back to trouble us, right? It’s hard to permanently remove them and sometimes they go on to trouble generations that come after us. I like how Magrey DeVega puts it:

“The Bible says that we do not need to clean our own life. We need only depend on what God has offered to us through Jesus Christ. Because on the cross and through the empty tomb, God’s very own heart has been poured out for all creation. To cleanse and purify even the most permanent stains.”

You’ve probably heard of Murphy’s Law, “Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.” But have you heard of Imbese’s Law of the Conservation of Filth? “In order for something to become clean, something else must become dirty.”

Think about it - it’s true! Whether you think of taking a shower, washing dishes or a car - the dirt has to go somewhere, it doesn’t just disappear. In order for dishes, body parts or cars to get clean, dishwater, washcloths and sponges need to get dirty. In that way, Imbese’s law is theological. In order for sin to go away, sin has to go somewhere. For us to become clean, to have our sin removed, something - or someone - has to become dirty. From the Bible’s perspective, that “thing” that became dirty so that we might be clean is the blood of Jesus Christ and all we have to do is confess our sins and allow Jesus to cleanse us of ALL unrighteousness, which orients us toward new life continually.