God’s Right-Hand Man

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Matthew 25:31-46

Sermon Series:
iBelieve – A Study of the Apostles’ Creed

God...is ambidextrous.

This spring, we’re preaching our way through the Apostles’ Creed. Our goal, as we have said previously, is to peal away all the bric-a-brac, bells and whistles, to recover what it really means to follow Jesus.

Last Sunday, we focused on the words, “On the third day he rose from the dead.” You wouldn’t believe all the people who wanted to learn more about this section of the creed. We packed the house on Easter. We had to set up folding chairs and use the lobby as overflow. By the look of things today, people seem far less interested in the topic, “and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” Don’t people know Easter inaugurates seven weeks of emphasis called Eastertide? Apparently, lots of people didn’t get that memo.

I had a vivid imagination as a child. When I heard people recite the Apostles’ Creed, somehow I imagined Jesus actually sitting on God’s right hand. I couldn’t understand why Jesus would want to sit on God’s right hand.

Scripture is replete with references to Jesus ascending into heaven and sitting on God’s right hand. Yet, there is nothing in the Bible about God’s left hand. Wouldn’t you know it? Not only is all the world right-handed, but now God is represented to us as a righty also? Even Michelangelo’s painting on the Sistine chapel depicts God creating Adam with his right hand.

My preschool teachers tried in vain to teach me to write with my right hand. Surely they knew the trouble awaiting me as a southpaw. Maybe they were aware that only 8-15 per cent of the world’s population is left-handed. Scissors don’t work nearly as well for a left-hander; neither do can openers or power tools. If you doubt that we live in a right-handed world, why is a put-down or insult considered a “left-handed compliment?”

God, it turns out, is ambidextrous. God is equally adept with either hand. The language in Scripture and our creeds that Jesus sits at the right hand of God is metaphorical. This Jesus, who descends to the lowest place on Good Friday, has now been raised to the highest place.

The Apostles’ Creed contains only 102 words. Why do the originators of this creed regard this sit-on-the-right-hand-of-God phrase as important enough to be included in
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- C.S. Lewis

The language of Jesus seated on the right hand of God is everywhere in Scripture. The book of Hebrews is a case in point. “But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins he sat down at the right hand of God” (10:12). Hebrews begins with the words, “After he had provided purification of sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (1:3).

What comes to mind when you hear this word sin? When the topic of sin comes up in church circles, sooner or later we end up talking about sex. Sexual sins always seem to headline any list of sins. We’re not as vigilant about monitoring seemingly less lethal sins. Take gossip. Sure, we click our tongues at the perils of gossip, but we join right in on the delicious delight of talking about people behind their backs. Yes, gossip is a sin, but not a major infraction. So we rank sins in order of their magnitude. Read the letters of Paul and you’ll find gossip to be a killer sin. Busybodies, as they are called, create havoc on the church. Spreading gossip is like blowing on the head of a dandelion seed. Speaking truthfully turns out to be foundational to Christian community.

Some people can’t understand why the church talks so much about the topic of sin. Isn’t all this talk about sin rather morbid? C.S. Lewis asks the identical question in his book, God in the Dock. “Those who do not think about their own sins make up for it by thinking incessantly about the sins of others. It is healthier to think of one’s own sins. It is the reverse of morbid.”

The Old Testament remedy for sins is centered on the priestly ritual of sacrifice. The ritual of animal sacrifice seems barbaric to our modern 21st century sensibilities. But people in the Bible were agrarian types who measured their assets in terms of livestock. So, it’s perfectly natural for them to sacrifice something of value.

The temple priest took blood from the animal sacrifice and sprinkled it on the altar to express remorse for sins. We read in Hebrews, “Day after day the priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices…” (10:11). But, in verse 12, a solitary priest offers a single sacrifice for sins. If you, in a priest role, offer the blood of animals, you can do so again and again. The reason is simple: it’s not your blood. If you are offering your own blood, you can do it only once.

Jesus plays both the role of priest and victim in this passage. He serves as our high priest offering atonement for our sins by becoming the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

Maybe you recall the old story about the pig and the chicken who decided to open a
The gospel centers on receiving salvation, not achieving salvation.

restaurant together. “I know what we’ll call it,” says the chicken to the pig. “We’ll call it ham and eggs.” “I don’t think so,” the pig protests. “That way I’d be committed but you’d only be involved.” Jesus offering his own life for sins is the epitome of commitment.

“But when the priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins he sat down at the right hand of God” (10:12). While the priest stands to do his work, this high priest sits down because there is nothing left for him to do after he offers himself. Jesus doesn’t sit down because he’s tired; he sits because his work is done. That’s why Jesus proclaims on the cross, “It is finished.” Once Jesus offers his life for sin, his sacrificial work is complete.

“But when this priest had offered for all time a sacrifice for sins he sat down at the right hand of God” (10:12). When distinguished guests of honor are entertained at a royal banquet, they are seated to the right of the king. The second most distinguished guest is seated to his left. I’ll bet the same etiquette is still operates in the White House today. This explains why two of Jesus’ disciples, James and John, ask for the privilege of being seated to Jesus’ right and left in glory (Mark 10:37). To be seated to the right is the highest honor.

Allow me to personalize this sermon for you. Christ’s sacrifice for your sins is now complete. Christ has paid the ultimate price for our sins and now our life is stamped, “paid in full.” If you are laboring with the burden that there are sins committed in your past that God can’t forgive, relax already. Christ is far more willing to forgive than you are to ask for pardon.

You may be holding out that somehow it’s up to you to atone for your sins. It’s no use, my friends. It is finished. Receive the gift. Trust in the finished work of Christ.

Christianity is unique among world’s religions. Other religions are based on achieving salvation while the Christian gospel centers on receiving salvation.

Have you received God’s gift of salvation in Jesus Christ? If you answer in the negative or are unsure about this question, join me in a closing prayer a few moments from now.

If you are a Christian and have previously professed your allegiance to Jesus Christ as Savior, are you on a path of discipleship? Are you growing into the image of Christ? We talk a great deal about discipleship in this church. We are learning all our lives what it means to follow Christ.

Maybe you feel as though you have reached a spiritual plateau in your life and are becoming stagnant in matters of faith. You’ve been a Christian for years and don’t see much progress in your walk with Christ. Perhaps you are trying
too hard to live the Christian life in your own strength. You are exerting so much energy trying to do the right thing that you are not allowing Christ to work through you. Christ wants you to succeed. He wants you to grow. Although the sacrificial work of Christ is done, his priestly ministry continues. Hebrews tells us, “He lives to intercede for us” (7:25). Jesus Christ is right now interceding for you.

We ask people all the time to intercede for us. We urge people to put in a good word for us. A good intercessor is one who maintains a good relationship with two parties. Jesus is ideal in this regard; he’s the perfect go-between. He has complete access to God; he has the Father’s ear, you might say, yet also knows instinctively in his humanity the lure of temptation and the weakness of the flesh.

I don’t want to leave you with the impression that God must somehow be persuaded to show us mercy. It’s not Jesus’ job to convince an otherwise curmudgeon God to cut us some slack. Intercession originates in the heart of God. God is not the prosecuting attorney; He is part of our defense team. God is so for us that He gave His only Son for us.

What I am talking about is encapsulated in two Biblical words: salvation and sanctification. Salvation is instantaneous the moment we profess Jesus Christ as our savior for sin. But the process of growing into the image of Christ, what the Bible calls sanctification, is the journey of a lifetime.

Christ will do his part: do your part. As Dallas Willard writes, “Grace is opposed to earning, but not to effort.”

Worship regularly. Create a weekly rhythm of worship in your life. Come to worship whenever you are in town. When you are away for the weekend, join us online or attend another church.

Pray regularly. Pray with other people. Pray when you are driving to work or walking on the bike trail. Pray when you are jogging or standing in line. Pray a Psalm each day.

Read the Word regularly. Resolve to read a chapter of the Bible each day. Access the Bible on your iPhone or CD. Join a Bible study.

Serve regularly. Sponsor a child. Teach Sunday School. Tutor a child at a nearby elementary school. Mentor a high school student. Drive a senior to day care. Cook a meal for homeless teens at a Vienna shelter.

You get the idea. Do your part and Christ will do the rest. Don’t let previous failures deprive you of God’s best.

The following prayer is as relevant to those here today beginning a new life in Christ as well as those who are returning to Christ for the umpteenth time.

*Lord Jesus, I invite you into my life. I confess that you died for my sins and extend to me the unconditional gift of forgiveness. I endeavor from this moment forward to live for you and follow you as Lord of my life. I trust that you will transform me into the person you want me to become. Fill me with your Spirit’s presence so that I may share this faith and love with other people. I offer this prayer with gratitude in Jesus’ name. Amen.*