

Christ our Sacrifice

Date: 23 March 2025, 3rd Sunday in Lent

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: The Cross of Christ

Texts: Hebrews 9.1-28, 10.19-25

What do you do with your guilt when you know you've done something wrong? How do you make things right?

In 2017 a fascinating essay by Wilfred McClay called 'The Strange Persistence of Guilt' appeared in *The Hedgehog Review*. And yes, despite the name, it is a serious journal. McClay writes, "I use the words *strange persistence* to suggest that the modern drama of guilt has not followed the script that was written for it." Freud had argued that guilt is psychologically damaging. Both he and Nietzsche laid the blame for guilt on Christianity with all its talk of sin and judgment. The solution? Banish God, and you'd banish guilt. Our culture has done its best to push God aside, but "Guilt has not merely lingered. It has grown, even metastasized, into an ever more powerful and pervasive element in the life of the contemporary West". Technology gives us power and power entails responsibility, and responsibility, McClay notes, leads to guilt:

"Whatever donation I make to a charitable organization, it can never be as much as I could have given. I can never diminish my carbon footprint enough, or give to the poor enough. ... Colonialism, slavery, structural poverty, water pollution, deforestation — there's an endless list of items for which you and I can take the rap."

Guilt is something we all experience. It's important to distinguish between true guilt and false guilt. John Stott writes, "Our conscience is not always a reliable guide. There is such a thing as a morbid, overscrupulous conscience."² This describes many people I know, both Christians and non Christians, who spend their days constantly feeling guilty. But sometimes we ought to feel guilty. As the confession in the Anglican service of morning prayer says, "we have left undone what we ought to have done, and we have done what we ought not to have done." You humiliate a friend, just to get a laugh from those watching. You lash out at your kids in anger. You betray someone you love. There's that thing that you know is wrong, and you've tried to stop, but you keep coming back to it even though the guilt is eating you up, like the junkie seeking the next hit. And you feel sick, and ashamed, and guilty. What are we to do with our guilt? We all need an answer whether you're a Christian or not.

Philosopher Merold Westphal writes that guilt is a mode of self consciousness. You know you've done the wrong thing and you're ashamed of yourself and you have a sense that you deserve some sort of punishment.³ Guilt has such purchase on us, at least according to the Bible, because it's *true*. The Bible's description of the human condition is that we're made in

¹ Wilfred McClay, 'The Strange Persistence of Guilt', *The Hedgehog Review*, 19.1, 2017.

² John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, IVP 2017: 116

³ Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt and Death*, Indiana University Press, 1987: 75-76

the image of God and crowned with glory and honour, but we are also fallen. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” Paul writes.⁴ Sin is not just the bad things we do, the “sins” we commit. These spring from the deeper sin, our fundamental stance towards God. We revolt against our position as dependent creatures. Instead of trusting and obeying our Creator, we claim our own self-dependence and autonomy - that we have the right to do as we please. Our sins against our neighbour issue from the primary sin of failing to love God. And so of course this creates a distance and a barrier between us and God. We stand as guilty rebels before a holy and righteous God. We stand under his judgment because God takes our humanity seriously enough to hold us responsible for our attitudes and our actions. So what are we to do with our guilt?

Summarising ‘The Strange Persistence of Guilt’, journalist David Brooks writes:

“McClay is describing a world in which we’re still driven by an inextinguishable need to feel morally justified. ... And yet we have no clear framework or set of rituals to guide us in our quest for goodness. Worse, people have a sense of guilt and sin, but no longer a sense that they live in a loving universe marked by divine mercy, grace and forgiveness. There is sin but no formula for redemption.”⁵

This is the third in our Lenten series looking at the Cross of Christ. Over the series we’re asking the question: What has Jesus’ death on the cross accomplished? In our first two sermons we looked at *who* it was on the cross. We saw that Jesus hangs on the cross as our Representative, sharing fully in our humanity and doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. We saw that the cross Reveals both God’s justice because he punishes sin and God’s love for us, because in Jesus, God himself is hanging on the cross in our place. Having seen *who* hung on the cross, we are now turning to explore what the cross achieved. The bible uses a number of pictures to help us understand what Jesus did for us on the cross. Each of these speak to an aspect of our experience of being human. Today we’re looking at the cross as Christ’s **sacrifice for us**.

Now, I appreciate that the idea of sacrifice is almost completely removed from our experience. Some years back I was talking with a friend about this and she said, “I’m a classicist. I can see how the idea of sacrifice would have been meaningful to people in the ancient world where animal sacrifices were part of everyday life, but how is that meaningful to us today?” The irony is that sacrifice is absent from our culture because the book of Hebrews in particular shows how Christ’s death is the sacrifice that ends the need for all other sacrifices. Sacrifice is a key way the Bible understands Jesus death, but it does still intersect with our contemporary culture in that key verse - Hebrews 10.22

⁴ Romans 3.23

⁵ David Brooks, ‘The Strange Persistence of Guilt’ *New York Times*, 31.3.2017

let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

What are we to do with our guilt? Whether you're a Christian or not, the Scriptures offer Jesus' death for us as God's solution to that problem. That verse we just read comes at the end of a 6 chapter argument where Hebrews says that Jesus is both our high priest who eternally represents us before God. And, at the same time, on the cross he offered himself as a sacrifice for us. In doing so Jesus has accomplished 2 things for us: he has given us access to God - we can draw near to God; and his blood has cleansed our hearts from a guilty conscience. How does Jesus' death as a sacrifice achieve this?

One of the key things the book of Hebrews repeats is that the Old Testament sacrificial system was a copy and a shadow of the reality that was to come in Christ. As such understanding the sacrificial system helps us understand Christ. The tabernacle and the temple in Jerusalem were designed to be the place where God symbolically dwelt in the middle of his people. While Israel was travelling in the wilderness when they made camp the tabernacle would be set up in the middle of the 12 tribes, with 3 tribes on each side of the tabernacle. Inside the tabernacle was the outer court for the people. Then there was a tent with two rooms. The outer room was where the priest could go and do their work. Then there was a special curtain and behind this, the inner room. This was the Most Holy Place with the Ark of the Covenant at the centre and on top of the ark, the cherubim overshadowed the atonement cover, or the mercy seat - God's seat on earth. The design of the tabernacle taught that God wants to dwell in the midst of his people, but that they are separated from him because of their sin. Their sin is a barrier between them and going into the presence of God. Just like there were cherubim guarding the way back into Eden, so the curtain outside the holy of holies had cherubim embroidered on them guarding the entrance to the presence of God.

But there was one person who could go into God's presence. Only the high priest, and then only once a year, and "never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins of the people." This was on the day of atonement that Hebrews 9 focuses on and that you can read about in Leviticus 16. On that day the high priest would sacrifice a bull for his own sin and the sin of his household and he would sprinkle its blood on the mercy seat. Then he would take two goats. One he would slaughter and take its blood and sprinkle it on the mercy seat to make atonement for the sins of the people. When atonement had been made he would then take the second goat and holding its head he would confess over it all the sins of the people - he would put them on its head. Then he will send the goat away with somebody taking care of it. And Leviticus 16.22 says, "The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness."

What was going on in this strange, bloody ceremony? Sin and death are inextricably linked. Way back in the garden, God told our first parents that breaking his law would lead to death.

And so it proved to be. When they ate the fruit they were cast out of the garden, and the way to the tree of life was barred. They found themselves cursed. And cut off from the tree of life they would surely die. In Leviticus, we read of the possibility of forgiveness, but it comes at the cost of a life.

For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.
(Leviticus 17.11)

And this is what Hebrews is drawing on. The life of the goat was sacrificed for the sins of Israel in their place. It died so that they might live. Similarly, just like Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden so after Israel's sin had been symbolically transferred onto the second goat, the goat was sent out into the wilderness - in order that Israel might be able to stay in God's presence.

The Passover is another example. There a lamb was slain in place of the firstborn son. Its blood was painted over the door-frame of the house so that when the angel of death came he would see the blood of the lamb and pass over the house and spare the life of the firstborn.

The fundamental principle of sacrifice is that there is a substitute. The bull's life for the life of the priest. The goat's life for the life of the people. Blood for blood. Life for life. Hebrews 9.22 reads,

the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

Back in that essay, McClay writes, "Forgiveness is one of the chief antidotes to the forensic stigma of guilt ... yet forgiveness rightly understood can never deny the reality of justice. To forgive, whether one forgives trespasses or debts, means abandoning the just claims we have against others, in the name of the higher ground of love. Forgiveness affirms justice even in the act of suspending it. It is rare because it is so costly."

God, however, does not suspend his justice when he forgives. His forgiveness comes at the cost of his own precious blood. The mercy seat is the wood of the cross.

Hebrews says, it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. They were never effective in themselves, but were anticipations of the true sacrifice that was to come. On the cross, Christ entered into the true tabernacle, the true Most Holy Place. And there he offered, not the blood of bulls and goats, but his own most precious blood. By his blood he obtained eternal redemption. And so we read, Hebrews 9.14

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

Or again, verse 24

For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. ... he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. 27 Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, 28 so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

On the cross, Christ bears our sin. Paul writes, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us". "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross," says Peter.⁶

Hebrews tells us that Christ's blood cleanses us from guilt. And the reason is he has taken our guilt and shame and made it his own. And so we can have confidence to approach the throne of God, through Christ. I know getting this was a powerful moment for me. In my early 20s I went through a season of depression, in part due to a crushing sense of guilt from habitual sin. I'd always known that Christ died for my sins, but even after I'd confess and repent and ask for his forgiveness, I'd still feel guilty. And so I'd come back to that sin for comfort and the cycle would begin again. It was only when I met with a Christian counselor that he helped me see that on the cross Christ had taken not just my sin, but my guilt and shame too. They were no longer mine but his. It was only my pride that was holding on to the guilt, to somehow add to his atoning sacrifice. But He had already done it all on the cross. His sacrifice was sufficient. I needed to let go of my guilt and give it to him. And doing so I felt the sweet rain of his forgiveness washing my conscience from all guilt.

How do you deal with your guilt? Forgive yourself we're told. Just stop feeling guilty. I don't know about you, but I'm not strong enough to do that, and in any case I can't. No one can. But neither you or I need to. Because Christ has offered himself as the one true sacrifice and taken away our sins. He really has taken your guilt and shame. Ask for his forgiveness and you will receive it. You really do now have free and full access to God through Christ. So let us draw near to God! Let us hold on to this hope in Christ - because he is faithful. If you've been cleansed don't go back to what made you dirty in the first place. And let's not stop meeting together but keep encouraging each other and spurring each other on to love and good deeds. We do this as we come to share in the Lord's supper. This reminds us that Jesus is our Passover lamb sacrificed for us. God sees his blood and his judgment passes over us. He is our atoning sacrifice: his blood was shed for the forgiveness of our sins. In him our sin is taken away and our guilt atoned for. And that is just as real and true for us as when we eat the bread and drink the wine. So feed on him in your heart by faith.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5.21, 1 Peter 2.24