

**Our Great High Priest**

Isaiah 1:10-20 &amp; Hebrews 9:11-15

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March 29, 2009 – Passion Sunday

As you went about your daily business this week, did any of you happen to touch anything disgusting? I mean something really gross. When I worked fixing computers, it was a regular occurrence. You'd think that fixing computers would be a pretty clean job, but there are lots of times when it's not. We'd get stuff from the mildly icky, like cracker crumbs in the keyboard, to the truly gross, like cat spray and dead mice. Sometimes you'd start taking a computer or a printer apart and the deeper you got into it the more you wished you had rubber gloves, and what's especially bad is when you get stuck working on one of these machines right before lunch. No matter how well you wash your hands, you just can't quite forget what it was you were touching – and of course it's especially bad when you can't quite identify what the sticky substance was... We've all had that happen. You're sitting somewhere and you touch the bottom of your chair or the bottom of a table and – ick – somebody's old gum reveals itself. Or you walk across your lawn and step in something your neighbour's dog left for you. It's nasty. You accidentally touch the old gum and for an hour afterward, even if you wash your hands, you somehow pay special attention to that finger that came in contact with it, and how, even after you've rubbed a bare spot in the lawn cleaning your befouled shoe, you still take it off and leave it in the garage before you go inside and walk across the living room carpet.

Even kids know better. For a while we had a cat in our neighbourhood that was always leaving dead mice and birds in a corner of our front lawn. I could always tell if it had left another present because the neighbourhood kids would be standing around it and poking it with sticks. They were curious, but they knew not to touch the dead animal. We all know not to touch these sorts of things. We work hard at staying clean. We shower daily. We

wash our hands. We keep a bottle of Purell on hand, just in case we touch something nasty and there's no soap and water around.

Now remember how Jesus responded to the Pharisees when they accused the disciples of not washing their hands before eating:

**You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men." And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand: not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man."** (Matthew 15:7-11)

Think of all those gross things you've touched – or worked so hard to avoid touching. Think of how often we get worked up because we touched something that "defiles" us or we go way out of our way to avoid coming into direct contact with it. But how often do we think about the sin in our lives that defiles us and separates us from God. Our desire to be clean drives us to avoid the dirty. And yet consider that God's innate and perfect holiness does not tolerate the unholy. When we sin we remove ourselves from his presence. In the Old Testament, God used the Law as a tool to teach the people about the severity of their sins. The Law used externals to teach spiritual truths and to point to the Messiah who would come and fulfil the Law by meeting it perfectly where all of us have failed.

The Jews are notorious throughout the Old Testament for not understanding the inner spiritual truths of the Law. They focused on the externals. They went through the motions of serving God, but their hearts weren't in the right place. Look at our Old Testament lesson:

**"What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. "When you come to appear before me, who requires of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies – I cannot endure iniquity and solemn**

**assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:11-17)**

These were people who went through all the outward motions of piety. They made their sacrifices, they were regular in their religious observances, they were sticklers in obeying the Law down to the last letter, but when it came to applying God's principles in their lives, they didn't have a clue. Their external observances should have been a natural outgrowth of an internal relationship with God. The Law was given to teach them how unholy they were. It was to teach them thankfulness for the grace God gave them in the sacrificial system and in the coming Messiah – grace that restored them to fellowship with God. Instead, they used the Law as a measuring stick to see how good they could be. They missed the point. They were trying to earn their salvation. Through Isaiah, God's saying to them, "Look, I'm sick and tired of your empty sacrifices. You're bringing me these sacrificial animals as if I need them. You're coming to me and saying, 'Look how good I am God! Enjoy the lamb or the bull.' Hello!?! The sacrifice is for *you*, to remind *you* of *your* own sinfulness and the need *you* have to be restored to me."

But God also promised redemption. Look at verses 18-19:

**"Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land."**

I think it's very appropriate that our lessons take us back to the Old Testament sacrificial system on this Sunday that takes into Passiontide and prepares us for Holy Week and Easter. It contrasts the type – the shadow – in the Old Testament with the fulfillment of the type in the New

Testament. We see how the fulfillment surpasses the type in every way.

Look first at Hebrews 9:11, just the first half of the verse:

**But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come...**

Christ is our great High Priest and what he brings us as our High Priest is far better than anything that the old Levite High Priests could bring the Jews. The blessings that Christ brings us, the “good things to come” of verse 11 are the things that the Jews were looking forward to. Jewish promises are Christian realities, the hopes of the Jews are our certainties. What they looked forward to in the future is our present. The sacrificial system of the Tabernacle and the Temple were a type or a shadow that pointed to Christ, who is the real thing. It pointed to a future redeemer who would free his people from the bondage of sin. They had to look forward to that day with expectation. We live in that day.

Look at the rest of verse 11:

**...then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation)**

As our High Priest, Christ entered the Holy of Holies to atone for our sins. Remember that once every year, the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies, the place in the Temple where the *shekinah* glory of God dwelled, and into the presence of God the High Priest would bring the blood of a bull to atone for the sins of the people. He would pass through the Tabernacle that the Israelites had built to get there. Christ however, entered the presence of God directly in heaven, not through an earthly building, but through his own body when it was offered on the cross. Only he was holy and only he could make that sacrifice. In him the Word of God became incarnate and took on human flesh so that he could be a second Adam for us. The Tabernacle was an earthly illustration of the way to God that we only fully know in Christ.

And remember that the High Priest only entered the Holy of Holies once a year. God could have made this a daily sacrifice if he wanted to, but I think that in its

limitation to once every year it points toward the once for all sacrifice of Christ. In verse 12 we read:

**...he entered once for all into the Holy Place...**

Jesus completed his atoning work. He entered once for all, where the Jewish High Priest had to make his sacrifice every year. Their Day of Atonement was annual, but ours is eternal, and is eternally perfect. There is no need for a repeat of Christ’s sacrifice.

Look at the sacrifice he made:

**...taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.**

His is a perfect sacrifice. The Jewish High Priest offered a life lower than his own in the annual sacrifice. Jesus’ death was a true sacrifice, because it was the sacrifice of self. The animals offered in the Tabernacle and the Temple were not willing participants and they were not, in their lives, equal to those for whom they were sacrificed. In Hebrews 10:10 we read that “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

**For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.**

If the sacrifice of an unwilling animal could take away the ceremonial uncleanness of the people, how much more is done for us by the sacrifice of the Son of God? In the Old Testament the High Priest would sprinkle the people with water mixed with the ashes of a heifer to ritually cleanse them. But this only cleansed them on an external level. The sacrifice of Christ purifies us spiritually. In Christ the blood of the incarnate Word is offered. He was without blemish. The unblemished sacrificial animals of the Old Testament pointed to him. He is the only man who has ever lived and not been defiled by sin. It was his blood, not the blood of an animal, that was offered, as

verse 14 says, “through the eternal Spirit.” This is the final contrast with the old animal sacrifices. The author of Hebrews uses this phrase “eternal Spirit” to contrast with the old sacrifices of flesh. The animals offered in the Tabernacle were dumb brutes with little value. Christ on the other hand was God himself, he was eternal, and embodies spiritual perfection. There’s no comparison of value between the two. Christ’s sacrifice is infinitely better than any other. So if an animal sacrifice could provide ritual, external purification, how much more can Christ’s sacrifice purify us inwardly? I think this shows us just how defiled we really are by our sins. Too many of the Jews never looked beyond the animal sacrifices to see what they pointed to. It was like they could buy off God with one of their animals. “Okay God, I sinned, now here’s your sacrifice.” Maybe it hurt a little in the pocketbook, but it wasn’t any big deal. But when we see that only God himself could become the perfect sacrifice for our sins it should drive home the point that our sins really are a big deal. It also drives home just how much God wants us to be reconciled to him that he would die in our place so that we can be brought back to spiritual life and health and into fellowship with him.

Look at verse 15:

**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 which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant.**

The Jewish Day of Atonement was really the cornerstone of the Old Covenant, because it was on that day each year that their state of grace was renewed by God. Christ’s atonement brought a better covenant. His death is the pledge of our inheritance in the kingdom of grace and glory. Remember that you can’t receive an inheritance until the person who made the will dies. Christ died for us and we have already received our inheritance of eternal life.

The only life we have is in the free gift of grace that we find through Christ’s sacrifice. There is no life in the Law of the Old Testament. Looking for life through the Law is futile, except that it will point us to Christ. The purpose of the

Law was to convict the people of their sins. It teaches us what's right and what's wrong, and because of that it shows just how much we deserve God's eternal punishment. It's the measuring stick that condemns us to hell by showing us how far we are from God's perfect holiness and by showing us how impossible it is for us to live up to his standards. Our "dead works" – to use the language of verse 14 – condemn us. But Christ's sacrifice purifies us. Verse 14 ends with a call to us:

**how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.**

Christ became the sacrifice that we couldn't make on our own. In return we give ourselves over to him. In Romans 12:1-2 St. Paul writes:

**I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.**

God didn't redeem us so that we could continue living our old lives. His grace also sanctifies us, it works in our lives to make us more like him. God calls us to give ourselves back to him as living sacrifices. Being a dead sacrifice is easy. You just lay there on the altar. But God call us to put our lives on his altar – to dedicate ourselves to him and to his service. That's not always easy for us to do, when our natural tendency is to want to crawl off that altar and do our own thing.

Each morning when I get up, I find it helpful to visualize an altar, the sort of thing Abraham would have built when he went to sacrifice Isaac, made of piled stones on a hilltop. I visualize myself climbing up the stones and laying myself down on top of that altar, consecrating my life that day to God and asking him to give me the grace to stay there. As we sit atop God's altar, contemplate the words of this wonderful hymn that I think really sums up what our prayer should be:

*Take my life, and let it be  
consecrated, Lord, to thee;  
take my moments and my days,  
let them flow in ceaseless praise.*

*Take my hands, and let them move  
at the impulse of thy love;  
take my feet, and let them be  
swift and beautiful for thee.*

*Take my voice, and let me sing  
always, only, for my King;  
take my intellect, and use  
every power as thou shalt choose.*

*Take my will and make it thine;  
it shall be no longer mine;  
take my self, and I will be  
ever, only, all for thee.*

Prayer:

Holy and Almighty God, we thank you for the gift of your Son who has become our Great High Priest and offered himself once and for all to atone for our sins. We thank you for the grace that we find in him and we pray that you will keep us faithful to that grace, that we will continue daily to conform to his image. Give us the grace to consecrate our lives to you each day, Lord, and let us be tools that are useful to you. In the name of Jesus Christ, Our Great High Priest, we pray. Amen.