

THE PRICE IS PAID

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Feb. 26, 2017
Based on John 19:16-24, 28-30; Colossians 2:13-14, Hebrews 9:11-14***

The sermon this morning is the third in a sermon series entitled, “The Points of the Cross—How the Cross of Christ Can Save You.” In the last installment of this series, we noted that human beings typically want to imagine that their basic problem is something outside themselves; but the Biblical message makes plain that the problem is within us. The fundamental human problem is the spiritual brokenness and alienation from God that is in the heart of every human being—what the Bible calls sin. It is this problem that is directly and decisively addressed by Christ on the cross. We considered this theme on an individual, personal level last time; today we will pursue the theme on a larger scale. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

There is a basic idea that runs through all religion. It is that human life is off kilter; and because human beings are off kilter, the whole planet is off kilter. You don’t have to read far in the news to see that that is the case. Our world in many ways is a mess, and our human misdeeds are increasingly throwing the whole planet off balance, as we see for example in global warming.

One way that human beings respond to such disarray—which we noted in the last sermon—is that we try to ignore or overlook the problems. This past week, weren’t the temperatures delightful? The spring bulbs in our gardens are sprouting nicely—maybe global warming is not such a bad thing after all! There are many issues in life which we may try to simply ignore. But when life is off kilter, eventually there is a tipping point.

So we may be convinced that something needs to be done. But when it comes to addressing our fundamental human problem, we suffer from the fact that we so readily want to define the human problem as something beyond ourselves. So we imagine that some external change is going to make everything right. You can see multiple examples of this on a large scale in the past century. Communists defined the problem as the capitalist ruling class; just get rid of the capitalists, they thought, and the world would be set right. Fascists defined the problem as the foreign elements among us; get rid of them, they said, and all will be better. Radical Islamists today define the problem as the unbelievers; impose a strict religious law on everyone, they think, and the kingdom of God will be here. All these approaches were disasters, because they misdiagnosed the human problem as something external out there, and the contrived solutions that they put forth—wiping out the capitalists or the foreigners or the unbelievers—were actually driven by the real human problem, the sin that is in the human heart. Thus Communists, Fascists, and Radical Islamists all acted in brutal hate, because they left unaddressed the brokenness in their own soul.

In Jesus' day, there were many people who wanted to see the problem as something external to themselves. We noted in the last installment of this series how many people in Judea and Galilee wanted to see the Romans, or sinners out there in general, as the problem. Thus when people longed for a Messiah, they looked for the Messiah to defeat, crush, and eliminate all those enemies of God—the Romans along with other “sinners.” Then, they thought, the kingdom of God would arrive—the kingdom of God being that condition when the world is no longer off kilter, when everything would be set aright.

But Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:21) The place where the world must be set aright is first of all inside us. The brokenness in the soul—the human alienation from God—must be resolved before anything else can be set right.

But how is that possible? If we are the problem, it is hard to see how we are going to become the answer. This is why we need a Savior. We need One who will transcend our human condition—to solve the problem of sin and bring us all back into a right relationship with God.

But how can there possibly be this sort of Savior? If the Savior is to bring the human race back into fellowship with God, then the Savior must be a human being—one who connects with all of us and represents all of us. But every human being is caught in sin and hopelessly alienated from God. This is why the Savior must be both God and human. The Savior must be divine, in order to have the power and the purity to address our human sin, but the Savior must also be human in order to join with and transform our human condition. Thus Jesus Christ provides the answer, for He comes to us as God become human.

We have noted in the previous two sermons in this series how God through Christ joins in our human condition. That connection of God with us can be visualized by thinking of the downward beam of the cross. Christ on the cross unites himself with our human weakness and takes our brokenness upon himself.

But what then can Christ do about all the wrong in human beings? God cannot simply overlook the wrong in humanity, because if God just ignored the wickedness on earth, this would mean that there is no ultimate principle of justice, and our world would be permanently off kilter. In contrast, the Scriptures affirm, “God will judge the world in righteousness.” (Psalm 9:8) But if this is so, it seems that we sinners can never be reconciled with God, because we stand forever under judgment. Christ provides the answer on the cross, as Christ takes upon himself all the judgment due for human sin. We noted that this can be visualized by thinking of an outstretched arm of the cross; we think of how Christ bears our burdens, taking upon himself the condemnation due to us. Thus judgment against sin is carried out; but because Christ has taken the burden of guilt from us, we can be forgiven.

So the cross becomes the place where God perfectly expresses both justice and mercy. But there is another aspect of what Christ does, which is well portrayed in that passage we heard from Hebrews.

The writer of Hebrews recalled what the high priest did in Old Testament days on the Day of Atonement, the most holy day of the year when the people sought forgiveness for sin and reconciliation with God. In the last installment of this sermon series, I mentioned how on the Day of Atonement the high priest would symbolically lay the sins of the people upon a goat, and the goat would be driven into the wilderness. “The goat,” said the book of Leviticus, “shall bear on itself the iniquities of the people.” (Leviticus 16:22) This was the scapegoat, and we noted that what happened symbolically once a year with this goat is what happened in reality and full measure on the cross, as Christ bore upon himself the sins and the guilt of all humanity.

But on the Day of Atonement there was also a second goat, in addition to the scapegoat, which was offered to God as a sacrifice or sin-offering on behalf of the people. There was also a bull offered as well. Whenever we read descriptions of Old Testament sacrifices, we are often struck by how bloody they were—animals were slaughtered, and there was blood being thrown all over the place—and this makes us squeamish, especially because we buy all our meat in nice cellophane wrapped packages, and we don’t have to deal with all this blood. But in Old Testament days the people raised animals for food and had to go through the process of butchering all the time. When butchering a goat, the only question was, “Are we going to eat this ourselves, or will this one be offered to God?” When a goat was sacrificed in the temple, the idea was that a life was being offered to God, and the blood in this respect symbolized life. So on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies—the sacred space in the very center of the temple, which contained the ark of the covenant that held the ten commandments, and that was thought of as the special dwelling place of God—and the priest would sprinkle the blood of the offering there. A life was being offered to God—which offset the sin of the people, and made up for the lack of the people—and as that life was offered it now represented the life of the whole people being offered to God. As the offering was accepted then by God, it represented the people being accepted by God.

This was all symbolism appropriate for an ancient agricultural people, but it pointed toward the reality of what Jesus Christ would do for us all. As our passage in Hebrews said, “When Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tabernacle (one not made with hands) he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls sanctifies those who have been defiled, how much more will the blood of Christ, who offered himself without blemish to God, purify us to worship the living God!” (Hebrews 9:11-14)

Christ now acts as both high priest and sacrifice. The high priest was the mediator, the one who went on behalf of the people into the very presence of God; and so Christ, having joined himself with us, brings us into the presence of God. Then the high priest offered a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the people; but of course the sacrifice was imperfect and had to be repeated constantly. But now Christ makes the final, perfect, and complete sacrifice of his own life—an offering of such magnitude it offsets the sins of all humanity. So the Day of Atonement for us is the day when Jesus offers himself up on our behalf on the cross, to restore all of humanity into fellowship with God.

Thus on the cross we see a movement of salvation, which begins with Christ joining with us in our broken condition. Then Christ takes upon himself all the consequences of our sin. And finally Christ offers himself up as the perfect offering for us, which is well symbolized in the upward beam of the cross. So through the cross, we can be raised up out of sin into a life-giving relationship with God, in which we can life in God's grace and God's promises.

This whole movement can be clearly seen by looking at the story of the crucifixion itself. We heard some of that story from the gospel of John. John reported that "they crucified him," (John 19:18), and that simple phrase says a great deal. It says that Jesus underwent extraordinary suffering to the point of death. John reported further how in the process Jesus was submitted to humiliating insults, as the soldiers, for example, cast lots for his clothing. Then he reported that one of the utterances of Jesus on the cross was "I thirst," and John noted that this fulfilled Scripture. [*Jesus said (in order to fulfill Scripture), "I thirst." John 19:28*] The Scripture that is called to mind here is Psalm 69, which says, "Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none. They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." (Psalm 69:20-21) All this reveals how Jesus on the cross joined himself fully in our broken human condition. He may be the Son of God, but he did not just sail through the experience of the cross. He felt all our human weakness and pain. Furthermore, it clear on the cross that Jesus took upon himself punishment that he did not deserve; but he did it for us. He took upon himself the judgment that is due for all our human sin.

Thus Jesus connects with us, and bears our burdens. The climax of the crucifixion is that Jesus offers his life up to God. This final movement is expressed in Jesus' two last words from the cross. The gospel of Luke reports that Jesus near the end said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23:46); and John, in the passage we heard earlier, reports how Jesus said, "It is finished." (John 19:30)

This is a particularly significant phrase. "It is finished" translates one original Greek word—*tetelestai*. It carries the sense of something being completed or taken care of or paid. In the ancient Roman world, if you had an outstanding bill, and it was paid off, the merchant would write across the bill, *tetelestai*—paid in full. Thus Jesus' offering on the

cross pays off our debt to God. The apostle Paul, in that passage we heard from Colossians, used precisely this image as he wrote: “When you were dead in your trespasses, God made you alive together with Christ, when He forgave us all our trespasses, cancelling the record of debt that stood against us. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” Colossians 2:13-14

The message is clear: all that is off kilter within us—all that is off kilter in our lives and in our world—is set right through Jesus Christ. And as Christ brings us back into a right relationship with God, we can join with Christ in his work of setting the world as a whole aright. We will pursue that theme next week. The key is to receive the answer of Christ for our own soul—to receive what Christ has done for us into our own hearts and lives. So we can experience how Christ unites himself with us, we can know that Christ has paid the price for us; and as we receive that gift and put our trust in Christ, he lifts us into everlasting fellowship with God.