

Crucifixion: Sacrifice

Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

Wyoming Baptist Church

Sunday, August 12, 2018

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, help us to see you in today's scripture. Show us where your Spirit is moving.

And then give us the wisdom and the courage to follow. Amen.

About a month or so ago, Jeff Singleton sent me a story. It was a tweet, actually. I had just preached on love, and Jeff thought this story was a good illustration of what we had talked about. And, he was right. It's fantastic. It's a story from a guy named Jim Clark who's a surgeon, and he was about to operate on a little girl when he realized that she needed O-blood but that the hospital didn't have any. But, she had a twin brother, and he had O-blood. So, he explained to her brother that this was a matter of life and death. The way Jim tells it, the boy sat there for a while and then said goodbye to his parents. Jim thought nothing of it until he finished drawing the boy's blood. That's when the boy asked him, "So when will I die?" The boy thought that what Jim meant by "life and death" was that he was being asked to give his life for his sister's. He thought he was giving his life for hers.

I mean, how can you get any better than that? Of course, we all know Jesus says stuff like this. One of his most famous lines is the one where he tells us that "no one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends." But, that's Jesus. Of course, if there was anyone who ever got what Jesus was talking about, it was that kid. I told Jeff that if one of my kids ever did something like that, I'd consider my parenting a success. I just think it's that remarkable.

Last week, we talked about the cross in terms of Jesus' descent into hell. We said that when Jesus died, he took sin and death and evil in his hands, and he defeated them. We talked about the fact that this was something we couldn't do because sin and death and evil are like a cancer deep inside our bones. God himself had to die to defeat death. He had to die to reach down into our hearts and minds and souls. He had to die to go all the way down into hell and rip out the devil. We talked about the crucifixion as the way that God battled against and got rid of sin and death. When Jesus descends into hell, he *delivers* us from these things. The Bible often talks about them like they're *alien powers*. They're outside of us, infiltrating us and our world; they're a cancer. These are all metaphors, of course, but they're metaphors of something that is real, something that we can't quite put our finger on but we know in our bones is there.

That said, there's another way that the Bible talks about the crucifixion, and it's just as important. And that is the fact that Jesus didn't just die on the cross to deliver us from sin and death;

he died on the cross to make atonement for them. He died on the cross to make atonement *for us*, for *our* sin. It's not enough to say that sin and evil are *alien powers*. We have to say that sin and evil are part of us. In some very important sense, *we* are responsible for sin and evil. That's the story of the Bible from the very beginning. Sin and evil come to us from the outside – *like a serpent* – but then we make them our own. Adam and Eve took the fruit and ate it. There is culpability there. There is responsibility. There is guilt. And on the cross, God does something about that, too: *God makes atonement for our sin.*ⁱ

And the way that God does this, we're told, is through *sacrifice*. Listen to Paul talk to the Ephesians again: "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Two things about this passage stand out: At the end, Paul talks about the crucifixion as "a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." This language doesn't just come out of nowhere. It's steeped in the Old Testament's description and explanation of the Jews' sacrificial rituals. This is *temple* language. We'll talk more about that in a minute.

What this Ephesians passage also says is that we're *not* passive observers in all of this. We're not just victims. *We're agents*. There is a ton of responsibility here. Just look at all the imperatives: Put away falsehood. Speak the truth. Be angry but don't sin. Give up stealing. Do honest work. Don't let evil talk come out of your mouth. Don't grieve the Holy Spirit. Put away all bitterness. Be kind and forgive. Imitate God. Live in love. *Don't make room for the devil!* Now, think about that. Paul says, "Don't make room for the devil." The dual nature of sin and death and evil is right there. They're both something outside of us *and* inside of us. Sin and death and evil are something that's our own fault, too.

In other words, Paul's assuming that these things aren't just alien powers that need to be destroyed. They're part of who we are. Put another way, *we are sinful people who need forgiveness*. And not just forgiveness, but *atonement* – and in the world of the Bible, there's really only one way that kind of atonement happens, and that's through *blood* – sacrifice and the shedding of blood.

That's why I asked Jamie earlier this week if we couldn't sing some songs this morning "about the blood." I even suggested a few just in case he didn't know what I was talking about:

There was, of course, the one we just sang: *There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel's veins...*

But there was also this one: *There is power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the Lamb...*

Oh, and one of my favorites: *What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Oh, precious is the flow that makes me white as snow! No other fount I know – nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Jamie hated me for this, by the way. He has a name for this type of song. He calls them the *Crimson Hymns*. When he was a kid, every time he was forced to sing these things, he'd almost pass out because he couldn't stop imagining Jesus bleeding out, and that'd make him queasy enough that he'd have to run off to the bathroom so that he wouldn't faint or make some sort of gross scene on the sanctuary floor.

I can't really talk, though. I pass out every time single time I give blood. But I grew up loving these *Crimson Hymns*, and I still find them powerful. There's truth in them, even if the blood may force little kids to the bathroom. In the Bible, the book of Hebrews is emphatic about this. Actually, it's almost like it thinks we'd all be stupid to even think for a second that atonement could come without sacrifice. "Without the shedding of blood," it says, "there is no forgiveness of sins." Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins.

Without the shedding of blood, there is no atonement.

That's the whole basis of the sacrificial system of the ancient Hebrews and Israelites. The book of Leviticus is full of all these various rules and regulations for dealing with sin. Sin couldn't just be forgiven and set aside, even though *we'd* probably like to think that. *We're* the ones, after all, who say that we should just "forgive and forget." But not the Israelites. To them, that was unheard of.

And, here's the deal, when you really stop to think about it, that really goes against our own thinking, too. Let me ask you this: What does "forgive and forget" ignore? It ignores justice. It ignores

our cry for justice and our deep desire to make things right. And if there was anything we learned last week about sin and evil and death, it was that God hates them. God hates sin and evil and death with a passion. They're the enemy. They can't be left to stand; they must be rooted out. Justice must be done. Jesus tells us that we must forgive seventy-seven times – an *infinite* number of times – but he also tells the woman caught in adultery to go and sin no more. Sin is not just something that we can forgive and forget. It's something that must be dealt with. It's something we must work to change. *Otherwise*, forgiveness really just boils down to tolerance.

So, in the Old Testament, what happens is that people were told to make sacrifices every year, and the biggest day for all of this was what was called the Day of Atonement. What happened on that day was that the high priest would kill a goat and then bring it into the very presence of God in the heart of the temple, all the way up to what was called the "Mercy Seat." Then he would sprinkle the blood on that Mercy Seat and everywhere in front of it. The book of Leviticus tells us that this was supposed to cleanse the people of their sins. It was supposed to make them right and just and righteous before God. In other words, it was supposed to atone for them.

When you get right down to it then, the whole premise of the sacrificial system was this: *Sin costs something*.ⁱⁱ Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. Sin costs something, and in the old way of things, the blood of that goat was considered payment enough for the people's sin, at least until the next year.

But that's the thing: It was never *really* enough – not in the long run. That's what the New Testament book of Hebrews is saying when it tells us that *Jesus* isn't just our high priest. He's not just the one who goes into the Holy of Holies, into the very heart of the temple where God is sitting on the Mercy Seat. Jesus isn't just our high priest – he's the actual *sacrifice* itself. It's *God's* blood that's poured out on the altar. When we really look at sin and death and evil like we did last week – when we really think about the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide or those two Serbian soldiers or even the hate that we saw a year ago in Charlottesville – what we see is that the blood of bulls and goats and sheep just isn't going to cut it. We need a bigger sacrifice. We need *the biggest* sacrifice, in fact. We need the sacrifice of God's own self.

What can wash away my sins, nothing but the blood of Jesus...

I think that a lot of the problems we have with this kind of thinking about sacrifice and blood and how it's needed for forgiveness and atonement – I think a lot of our problems with this come from the fact that we still have a really bad habit of thinking about faith and the spiritual life as *only* things

that happen in our minds. We think that forgiveness and healing are sheer acts of the will, whether it's God's or ours. Real, physical, material, life-giving sacrifice just doesn't make much sense to us. What *does* is making a different decision. What *does* is sheer *willpower*.

But the Bible paints a remarkably different picture. It's a whole lot more interested in physical space and physical distance. The temple was built in a lot of ways *to separate the people from God* – to keep them away from each other precisely because God was holy and the people were not. The point was to protect the God of Life from all the sinfulness and death of the people, which is why only the high priest could go into the Holy of Holies where God was, and he could do it only once a year on the Day of Atonement.

But Jesus' sacrifice changed all of that. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that when Jesus died – when the God of Life himself died – the curtain that stood at the front of the Holy of Holies and separated that same God from all of us was ripped in two. The point is that Christ's sacrifice removed the barrier that for so long stood between us and God. *We can enter into the presence of God ourselves. We have access to God's life* – each and every one of us.

At the cross, Jesus' blood washes away our sin. It doesn't just hide it so that we could then have an easier time forgetting it was there. Jesus' blood actually removes our sin altogether. He cleanses us from it; he makes us righteous, and most importantly, he gives us *life*. When you get right down to it, that's what all of this means: God sacrificed himself on the cross so that we could have access to his life. Matthew tells us that when the curtain of the Holy of Holies was torn in two, *the tombs were opened and the dead inside of them were raised up to new life*. When God was crucified, the world changed. Heaven and earth collided and the power of life that was once kept safe and secure behind the curtain of the temple was now set free upon the world, and what it did was it began healing and bringing new life.

That's why we sing about the blood. *That's* why we sing these Crimson Hymns, because blood doesn't just mean death. It also means *life*. Atonement isn't just forgiveness. It is healing. There's another verse of *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* that John didn't sing, but it makes this point perfectly:

*See from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorry meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown.*

Sorrow *and* love. Death and life. This is why we call Good Friday “good,” because when Jesus died on that cross, he brought all of us new life. He brought *change*. He brought atonement. And *that’s* really what sacrifice means in the end. It means dying to the old way of things and living a new lifeⁱⁱⁱ, and not just any new life, but a new life that follows the way of the cross itself. It’s a new life that takes *sacrifice* as its MO.

That’s why I put this drawing up on the screen for today, because what it illustrates is real sacrifice. It was done by a colleague of mine named Tim Lowly who works at Northpark University in Chicago. That’s his daughter in the middle. Her name is Temma, and the people holding her up – the ones who look like they’re carrying her – they’re some of his former students. You see, Temma had a cardiac arrest when she was a baby, and it left her with significant and irreversible brain damage. She can’t walk or really even move. She can hardly communicate. But, for over thirty years, Tim and his wife Sherrie have loved Temma. I was going to say that they’ve “taken care of her,” but that doesn’t really do it justice. They’ve given Temma life. Tim, her dad, has devoted his career to Temma. She’s not just the inspiration for his art; she’s the subject in almost all of it. Tim is always painting or drawing or sculpting Temma. And when you look at his work, you begin to see it. Tim has given Temma *life*. He’s given her agency. Just look at that drawing. Temma is in the center, where *she* in turn gives life to those carrying her. She makes them into a community. They carry her like a sacrifice to the altar, but *she’s* the one who gives them life.^{iv}

I have a cousin who lives in New Jersey. Her name is Beth and, last year, her husband, Pete, died of complications from multiple sclerosis. I asked her on Friday if I could use her story as an example of lived sacrifice, and she was kind of taken aback that somebody would see it as that. But that’s what it was. For about twelve years, Beth sacrificed for Pete. She poured herself into him, and in many ways, he did the same for her. M.S. is an autoimmune disease where the body eats away at the substance that covers the nerves in our brains and our spinal cords. What happens is that, eventually, your nerves stop working. Your brain tries to send your body signals, but it can’t. The pathways just aren’t there anymore. So, it tries over and over and over again until you’re utterly spent. Pete – Beth’s husband – said it was like lifting the heaviest weight you could imagine, except that what you were really lifting was your right leg. You keep trying but nothing happens.

Pete started out being able to walk just using the walls for support, but then he had to start using a walker. Then he progressed to needing a wheelchair. I remember my uncle, Bob, and aunt, Jeanne, would go on vacation with Pete and Beth, and they’d have to rent condos specifically made for

people with serious disabilities like his. M.S. changed their lives. One time during the last few years of his life, when things got particularly hard, Pete realized just how much his disease had taken a toll on Beth. It didn't just affect him. It affected her, too. He told her that he felt guilty that he had taken her joy away. He could see it in her face. Beth liked to dance, but she couldn't anymore. It had been years since they had danced together. He simply couldn't do it. His body wouldn't let him, and in some ways, it wouldn't even let her. *M.S. costs something*. Loving somebody with M.S. *costs something*. And, you know what? Beth will tell you that it cost her life, too. But it was a life she poured out herself. It was a life she poured out *for Pete*.

When the Apostle Paul tells us way back in Ephesians that we are to be imitators of God, this is what he's getting at. We are to "live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." We're to live lives poured out for each other. We're to remember that blood poured out in sacrifice and death is also blood poured out *for life*. Amen.

ⁱ I'm following Rutledge here. See her *Crucifixion*, 209.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 245.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 275.

^{iv} David Parkyn quoting Brian Volk in Tim Lowly's *Trying to Get a Sense of Scale*, 9.