

The Righteous for the Unrighteous

1 Peter 3:18

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on April 1, 2012

Introduction

- ❖ Have you ever tried to imagine what it must be like for a total newcomer to the Christian faith to walk into this building, join us in this service, and observe what goes on? Now some of you are new to this, so you don't have to imagine.
 - But it's safe to assume that most of us here have been going to church for years, some of us for our whole lives. And because of that we grow so accustomed to our traditions, our songs, and to the message we preach, that we forget how foreign and strange all of this can be for those outside the church, for those uninitiated in the faith.
 - Scripture even says that all our talk and celebration of a crucified Savior will be considered foolishness to the world. It won't make sense.

- ❖ You walk in into this sanctuary and the most prominent feature is this huge white cross looming above us. We take it for granted as something normal, but imagine if a first-century Greco-Roman was to be transported into the future to join us this morning. He would stare at that cross and think, "*What a weird way to decorate a room.*" From his perspective, it would be as if we had a huge hangman's noose affixed to the back wall. Remember, in his day, the cross was an object of scorn. It was the very means of executing the worst of criminals.
 - But we decorate our churches with crosses. We wear them around our necks. We sing songs about "The Wonderful Cross". We sing about how much we love the cross. Can you imagine walking into a room full of people singing about "The Wonderful Noose" or "The Wonderful Electric Chair"? It's strange, and it's good to be reminded.

- ❖ Today commemorates the start of Holy Week, which Christians observe as the final week of Jesus' earthly life that began on Palm Sunday with his celebrated welcome as he entered the gates of Jerusalem. But in five short days he was led out those same gates, but this time in shame, carrying his cross to Calvary's hill where he was brutally executed by crucifixion. And we, as Christians, have for centuries commemorated that day as Good Friday.
 - *Good?* That first-century time traveler would find our choice of adjectives quite odd. Why would you call a crucifixion 'good'? He probably would also point out that in his day thousands of men, even Jewish men like Jesus, were crucified by the Romans. *So what is so special about this one man's crucifixion that leads us to celebrate it and call it 'good'?*

- ❖ Ancient Greeks celebrated the spectacular feats of their demigod heroes like Hercules and Perseus. Muslims celebrate the life of Muhammed. Buddhists celebrate Buddha's teachings. But none of them celebrate the death of their hero, leader, or teacher. ***So why do Christians celebrate the suffering and death of Jesus as the greatest news that everyone in the world needs to hear and believe?***

- ❖ This single verse in **1 Peter 3:18** answers this question in one sentence. "***For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.***"

- Our usual practice on Sunday mornings is to study and apply whole passages of Scripture, but this morning I want to camp out on this one verse. I want to break it down to show you the glory and goodness of Jesus' suffering and death, especially as we begin Holy Week in preparation for Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday.

Accomplished For Sins

- ❖ So our question is, "*Why do Christians celebrate the suffering and death of their revered leader as such good news?*" According to this verse, there are three reasons. The first is this:
 - 1) Because it was accomplished for sins.**
 - Our verse begins with those words, "*For Christ also suffered once for sins.*" I know some translations say 'died' because some ancient manuscripts have that word, but 'suffered' is more probable because it fits the context of the preceding verse.
 - There Peter writes, "*For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins.*"
- ❖ So in context, Peter was writing to a Christian audience that was suffering for doing good in the name of Christ. So he writes to encourage them to endure such suffering, and elsewhere in the letter he presents the suffering that Christ endured for our sake as an example for how we are to endure suffering for his sake (cf. 2:20-21).
 - But here in v18, Peter is insisting that Christ is more than just an Example for us to follow. Compare v17 to v18. On one hand, you have Christians suffering *for* doing good – *because* of good. But on the other, you have Christ himself suffering *for* sins – *because* of sins.
 - If Peter intended in v18 to present Christ as merely an example of suffering for good, then he failed to make that connection since he writes here that Christ suffered – not *for* good – but *for* sins.
- ❖ *What does he mean by that?* Peter doesn't mean that Jesus suffered because of his own sins since he goes on to call Jesus "*the righteous*". Jesus had no sins of his own. **Rather with that phrase "*for sins*", Peter is using familiar biblical language to refer to what the Mosaic Law calls a sin-offering** (cf. Lev. 5:6, LXX).
 - The Mosaic Law demanded death as a judicial payment for sin, meaning anyone who sins before God owes a death to God, But graciously, within the Law, God provided a means by which you could sacrifice a sin-offering (usually a lamb or goat) as a substitute death in your place. Peter is saying that Christ is functioning in like manner. **His suffering and death is *for* sins – *for* the payment of sins as a sin-offering.**
- ❖ I realize this is a difficult concept for many to accept. This idea that someone would have to die on account of sins in order to satisfy God's justice doesn't sit right. ***Why would a supposedly good, loving God demand death as a payment for sins?*** If he expects us to forgive those who offend us without asking for them to kill something or to shed their blood as payment, then why would *he* demand such a thing?

- **I think the confusion stems from a misunderstood view of sin’s nature.** In the minds of many these days, the notion of sin is equivalent to a mistake. And in turn the Christian message of redemption and renewal (Good Friday/Resurrection Sunday) boils down to just forgiving mistakes and giving people another chance to do better.
- ❖ One day I was at Starbucks sitting next to this young man who was waxing eloquent to his friend about New Age philosophy. I tried to ignore him, but my ears perked up with he started talking about the notion of sin.
 - He was explaining that the word for ‘sin’ in the Bible meant ‘to miss the mark’ and was a term borrowed from the sport of archery. Then he stated, with confidence, that Christians have long perverted the word by attributing concepts of guilt and punishment. He asked his friend, “What happens in archery when you miss the mark? Are you put to death? No, you just pick up your arrow and try again! No one punishes you for sinning. It’s just a mistake.”
- ❖ What my young friend didn’t realize is that, while the word for sin does mean ‘to miss the mark’ in Greek and it was term in archery, the biblical authors assign a greater significance. **According to Scripture, to sin is not just to miss the target you were aiming at. To sin is to point your bow at the face of God and to let the arrow fly.**
- ❖ **Scripture defines sin as rebellion, as a personal affront against a Holy God, as a rejection of his good, loving rule over us.** We are told in the beginning, in Genesis 2, that God made Man and set humanity under his loving rule. He would be their King and they would his people. And the King gave a clear warning of what would happen if they rebelled and rejected his rule.
 - On the day he placed Man in the Garden, the King said, “*Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.*” (2:17) Death is the appropriate punishment for sin because sin is always, ultimately, a personal offense against God and his loving rule.
- ❖ So on that very first Good Friday, the world saw Jesus hanging on the cross and reckoned him to be like all who came before him who crucified for sins. And they were right! **On that day, God was punishing Jesus on the cross as an unrighteous sinner.**
 - *But how can that be?* Scripture goes into great lengths to prove that Jesus was sinless. Peter called him the Righteous One.
 - So the million-dollar question is this: ***How can the Righteous One be crucified for sins if he had none of his own?*** The answer is found in what the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther called “The Great Exchange”.
- ❖ Luther was referring to this notion of an exchange that took place on the cross as taught in verses like ours. “*The righteous for the unrighteous.*” The idea is that the Righteous Jesus exchanged places with Unrighteous Sinners so that our sins might be paid by his death and not our own. On the cross, Jesus substituted his death in our place.

- ❖ **Sometimes this is illustrated with a courtroom example where a judge finds a defendant guilty of some traffic violation**, but then graciously steps down from his bench and proceeds to pay the fine out of his pocket. This image communicates the idea of an exchange and a substitution. There is a penalty. It gets paid but not by the guilty party. Instead by a substitute.
 - But the illustration has a glaring problem. It only makes sense if you're dealing with traffic court. The city doesn't care who pays the fine as long as it gets paid. **But sin is not like a traffic fine that can be incurred by one party and settled by another.**

- ❖ Remember, sin in Scripture is a capital offense. Think about it: Would any court allow a mother, for example, to be executed in place of her son who committed a brutal murder, and then acquit her son of all charges?
 - We would all recognize that as a gross act of injustice. ***How then is it right, in the justice of God, for Jesus, who knew no sin, to die for the sins of the unrighteous?***

- ❖ Luther would tell us to keep in mind **the doctrine of a believer's union with Christ**. Scripture teaches that once you become a Christian, you are joined with Christ in a spiritual union. You are *in Christ* just as Christ is in you through his indwelling Spirit.
 - So if we are united with Christ, then this Great Exchange does not teach that guilt and punishment was transferred between two separate persons, one innocent and one guilty (like a mother and her son). **Rather, in the courtroom of heaven, Jesus and the believer are spiritually united and viewed as one.**

- ❖ **Luther compared it to the marital union between a husband and wife**. If you were debt free before you got married, but your fiancée has a huge school debt. Once you're married and united as one, by virtue of that union, the debt of your spouse has become your debt.
 - In the same way, by virtue of our union with Christ, a great exchange occurred at the cross. Our debt became his debt, so when Jesus hung there, he was not being punished as a righteous, innocent man. That would have been unjust.
 - **Rather Jesus was being justly punished as a unrighteous sinner** – in fact, as the most vile and guilty sinner who ever lived because he was bearing the debt of a countless multitude of sinners from the past, present, and future – all in union with him.

- ❖ So on the cross there was no violation of justice. An innocent person was not wrongly executed. And sinners, like us, who owed a death did not get away without paying.
 - **We owe God a death and by virtue of our union with Christ, in a real sense, we did die on the cross but without actually having to taste death itself** (2 Cor. 5:14). Our substitute tasted death for us!

- ❖ **Friends, are you starting to see why all of this is such good news?** *“Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous.”* All of us are in the category of *“the unrighteous”*. We have all sinned and fallen short. More than just making mistakes, we have rejected God's rule in order to make our own rules and to answer only to ourselves.

- ❖ But Scripture warns that such rebellion is only short lived for the grave awaits us all, and beyond that we will have to face the just wrath of the Great King. But that is why the words “Christ suffered *for* sins” are so sweet to our ears.
 - That’s why it leads us to sing for joy and to celebrate the wonderful cross upon which the Prince of Glory died, in our place, for our the payment and forgiveness of our sins!

Completed Once For All

- ❖ The second reason, according to our verse, why Christians celebrate Jesus’ suffering and death as good news is **2) Because it was completed once for all**. Note how it says, “*Christ suffered once for sins.*”
 - This is a crucial point because, unlike the sin-offerings in the Old Testament, **Jesus’ sin-offering of himself was final and all-sufficient**. There *was* and *is* no need for Christ to sacrifice himself again and again every time we sin. The payment he gave, once for all, was complete and covers all our sins – past, present, and future.

- ❖ The writer of Hebrews belabors this very point in chapter 9 of his letter. Turn there with me. Here he compares Jesus to the high priests of the Old Testament but describes him as the True and Better High Priest, our Great High Priest who offers a True and Better Sin-Offering, namely himself.
 - In v25, the writer explains that Jesus does not have to “*offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest entered the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he (Jesus) would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.*” (9:25-28)
 - Or look in chapter 10:11, “*And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.*” (10:11-12)

- ❖ At the end of the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, Tom Hank’s character is dying. He just led a company of men into enemy territory to save one man, Private James Francis Ryan. And with his dying last words, Hank’s character tells Private Ryan, “*James... earn this. Earn it.*”
 - Well those last words haunted James Francis Ryan for the rest of his life. The movie ends in present time, with the elderly veteran standing over the Arlington grave of Hank’s character. With tears in his eyes, he asks his wife to confirm that he has led a good life, that he is a good man. You can tell that ever since that day, he has been haunted by the question, “*Have I earned it? Or have I wasted it?*”

- ❖ From that day on, every time he snapped at his wife. Every time he disappointed his children. Every time he failed to live up to even his own standards. He must have wondered, “*Did I just waste it? Have I failed one too many times? Did they all die in vain?*” Can you imagine having that kind of fear and guilt hanging over you all the time?
- ❖ Friends, if you have trusted in Christ as your Great High Priest who offered a once-for-all sin-offering of himself for you, then there is no need to carry around this kind of heavy burden.
 - **Some of you are living your Christian lives in fear** – wondering if you’ve led a good enough life OR if you’ve sinned one too many times and wasted Jesus’ sacrifice. If you feel this way, then you have yet to understand and experience the goodness of his once-for-all sacrifice for your sins.
- ❖ Let me ask you, “*Whenever you feel convicted by the guilt of your sin, what do you instinctively do?*” Just like Adam and Eve, our instinct is to withdraw from God. To hide from him. **In a sense, we place ourselves in a self-imposed time out.** That’s what I do. I distance myself from God until that guilty feeling I have goes away.
 - And to help it go away faster, I might beat myself up over my sin OR try to offer up a sacrifice to atone for my failure. I might sacrifice my time or my service or my money. **Only until I give or do something for God do I feel like I’ve made up for it.** Only then do I feel ready to finish my time-out and approach God again.
- ❖ But this kind of thinking and relating to God is shortsighted. It’s a failure to understand what it means for Christ to have suffered and died for sins *once for all*. His last words as he hung there on the cross were not “**Earn this.**” No, his last words were “**It is finished**”.
 - It is finished. The work is done. **Jesus did not die in vain because all your sins were completely paid for by his sacrifice.** There is no need now to offer up sacrifices of your own. He only asks for you to receive his work with humility and gratitude and faith. Brothers and Sisters, lay your fears at the cross. Let this truth set you free from the heavy burden of sin and its guilt.

Brings Us Back to God

- ❖ The third and final reason why Christians celebrate the suffering and death of Christ as good news is **3) Because it brings us back to God.** Look at our verse again. “*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.*”
- ❖ We read earlier in Genesis 2 when God warned of sin’s consequence, he said, “*for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.*” That very day you will die. But Scripture goes on to say that Adam lived until he was 930 years old, so in what sense did he die that day?
 - **We would say Adam died a spiritual death characterized by a real separation from God.** The wages of sin is death and, yes, that includes a physical death, but it’s clear from Adam’s case that it includes far more.

- ❖ Upon their rebellion, Genesis 3 says God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden, from his very Presence. And from that moment on, Man died spiritually because we were cut off from God, the divine source of life. Our peace with God was gone and in its place sprang up hostility. Man was alienated from God. That is spiritual death.
- ❖ **Scripture says God placed a cherubim with a flaming sword at the entrance of the Garden, so even if Adam and Eve changed their minds and wanted to return, they could not.** Any attempt to enter the Garden, to return to God's Presence, would bring the sword of his wrath upon them.
 - We read on in Scripture and see the tabernacle of God designed with a huge, thick veil literally separating God's Presence from the people. This wasn't Moses' idea. God designed it this way. He told Moses, "*You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.*" (Ex. 33:20)
- ❖ All of this imagery communicates the same message, that sin has fractured our relationship with God. It has created a separation, leaving us spiritually dead and alienated.
 - **And this is not a self-imposed exile that we've created.** Reconciliation with God is not something we can initiate simply by turning around and saying "*I'm sorry*".
 - Granted, there is a sense in which we, in our sin, want nothing to do with God. **But the real barrier between God and Man is not Man's stubbornness. It is God's righteous indignation against Man's sin.** It's a flaming sword of God's wrath that will fall on the head of sinners, even if they somehow wanted to return to his Presence.
- ❖ Again, this is why the suffering and death of Christ is such good news for us to hear and to proclaim to everyone who is alienated from God. **Jesus, the Righteous One, is the only man who could walk right past that flaming sword into the Presence of God.** He had no sin to bar him from God.
 - But on Calvary's Hill, that very first Good Friday, Jesus bore the sins of others upon himself. The Righteous One became unrighteous. He who knew no sin became sin for us. **So that when he approached God's Presence, the flaming sword of God's wrath struck him down.** It killed him. He died. The devil squealed. The demons howled. The world stood by and just watched it happen. The faithful were crushed. Their one glimmering flame of hope was snuffed out. **It appeared as though we would never be able to return to God.** The Messiah was dead.
- ❖ But oh how we were wrong. **God looked upon Jesus' sacrifice and he was pleased.** The Righteous One had fully paid the penalty of the Unrighteous. And so it pleased God, on the third day, to raise Christ from the dead. On Friday he was "*put to death in the flesh*" but on Sunday he was "*made alive in the spirit*".

- On that glorious Sunday morning, Jesus arose. **He stood up and continued walking towards God's Presence. But this time he did not walk alone.** This time he brought with him a countless multitude of men, women, and children from every tribe, nation, and tongue.
 - Every one of them was united with Christ by faith. Every one had put their trust in Jesus as their Savior and Great High Priest. And so every one was able to walk past that flaming sword back into God's Holy Presence. *“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.”*

Conclusion

- ❖ Do you now see why we make so much of the cross? Why we celebrate and proclaim the suffering and death of Jesus as such good news for the world?
 - And friends, what's most important is that all of this can be good news for *you* personally – if you renounce your sins and turn to Christ in faith, trusting him as your Great High Priest who offered the Great Sin-Offering of himself to pay for your sins once-for-all in order to bring you back to God.
 - Christ is done with your sins and so are you. Let the truth set you free.
- ❖ *“My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought! My sin, not in part but the whole, Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more, Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!”*