



Gospel / Life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Study 4: Free From Guilt And Judgment To Peace And Righteousness

Reviewing: a useful quote from John Kleinig:

“When I speak about spirituality, I do not envisage something extraordinary—a superior way of being a Christian that is open only to a religious elite or more advanced stage in the spiritual life. I have in mind what is given to every faithful person. Christian spirituality is, quite simply, following Jesus. It is the ordinary life of faith... By our practice of spirituality we are not raised to a higher plane above the normal, everyday, bodily life, but we receive the Holy Spirit from Christ so that we can live in God’s presence each day of our lives as we deal with people and work, sin and abuse, inconvenience and heartbreak, trouble and tragedy. We are not called to become more spiritual by disengaging from our earthly life, but simply to rely on Jesus as we do what is given for us to do, experience what is given for us to experience, and enjoy what is given for us to enjoy.”¹

The Biggest Enemy To The Freedom Of The Spirit

Recently I was talking to an old friend—old in two ways: I have known him for a long time and the friendship has grown and blossomed into a very deep fellowship; and he is a man of more years’ life than I have. He spoke with me about something that has been troubling him recently, and more and more as he gets older. It is a problem with his memory. The problem is not with forgetfulness; it is with remembering. He often finds event from the past suddenly appearing in his mind once more, events that he thought had been resolved many years before, or at least left behind there. When these memories come they are often very painful, for they are memories of wrongs done, mistakes made, hurts caused. They are painful because it is as though these events still have power to condemn and torture him now.

He’s not alone. In my life, and in the lives of every Christian person I know, there is no problem more persistent, more pervading, and more perturbing than that of the guilty conscience. As a Christian I am sure that the Bible declares that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God the Father has dealt with the guilt of the whole human race, and with my own guilt, fully and finally. I am sure that God declares the ungodly to be “Not Guilty” on the basis of the grace that has come through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:23-24). But, despite knowing all these

¹ John W. Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality For Today*, Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, 2008, p. 23

things, and teaching all these things to others, I find that it is not a matter that, from my side, is “done and dusted”, never to be a trouble to me ever again.

There are all kinds of reasons for this. Before canvassing them, this ongoing trouble is a major part of the *Anfechtungen* that Luther spoke about when he talked about the troubles and temptations that come to us as part of the means by which God grows us to maturity in Christ. These troubles and temptations are also the means by which Satan our great enemy is seeking to destroy us, and particularly to destroy faith and confidence in God. “A bad conscience darkens our souls like nothing else on earth. Nothing is worse, spiritually, than the confusion that it brings. It affects our experience of God and life as a whole.”² How odd and how marvellous that God our Father uses this assault on us for our good and for our blessing!!

In a recent study, Trevor Faggotter said:

“In the lives of so many people today, criticism from others is the order of the day. It becomes the dull base-note in the symphony of life: ‘not good enough’! Daily failures, and even a lifetime of failing to satisfy other people—in particular parents, and family—leads to this ‘lack of self-worth’ that so many people feel in their deepest parts. Many people have experienced further waves of disapproval crashing across their lives, from teachers, mentors, sporting coaches, so-called friends, children, church members, and the like.”

As well as these external voices we have our own memory and our own conscience. Memory and conscience can work in terrible, concerted ways to remind and to judge us. There is much in life for which we feel falsely guilty and tormented, especially the guilt that surrounds the fact that we are beset by the most terrible temptations, which sadly seem so attractive and alluring to us, even though we resist them and flee from them. But perhaps the worst pains are those that come where there is memory of actual wrong-doing, or real hurt caused, or disobedience and failure towards God not only in thought but also in deed.

Trevor goes on:

“To hear a true, gracious, certain, confident and greater Word, which invalidates the endless whine of ‘failure’, is a part of the goal of gospel proclamation. Jesus came into the world to permanently change our status!”

Praying For The Holy Spirit

In the face of this constant nagging to our conscience of failure and guilt, the Christian is often found praying for the freedom of the Holy Spirit in this particular way: that we be reassured again, that we hear again the truth that we have been justified by the grace of our Lord Jesus, through faith. So, as well as praying that we hear this gospel again, we pray for the Lord to increase our faith. The truth is we will never get past this point while we live in this age. On the night before he died, Martin Luther wrote a short meditation on how he had learned to understand the Scriptures from his pastoral experience. That meditation ended with these words: “We are beggars. That is true.”³

² John Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality For Today*, p. 51

³ as told by John Kleinig in *Grace Upon Grace*, p. 29

Psalm 25:4-7 expresses the prayer for the Holy Spirit in the face of the nagging memory of wrongs done:

“Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths;
guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.
Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.
Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways;
according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD.”

Psalm 51 speaks of these things from a much more immediate perspective, when it is not simply memory of sin that is the problem, but the very real presence of sin recently committed—in this case, the psalm comes after David has been exposed by the prophet for his adultery with Bathsheba. The prayer has these requests, these pleas in it:

Have mercy on me... blot out... wash away... cleanse me... cleanse me... wash me... let me hear joy and gladness... let [me] rejoice... hide your face... blot out...

Each of these requests indicate something of awfulness of his sin in its impact upon him: he knows he is in deep need and under judgment; that there is a terrible stain which stands against him; that he has been deeply defiled; that all expectation of good for the future has been taken away; that God looks upon and sees what has happened with deep displeasure. His begging here is that God in mercy and according to His unfailing love, His compassion will release him from this.

Verses 10 to 12 connect this praying with the Holy Spirit:

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”

Meditating Upon The Word Of God

In answer to this prayer, as in answer to all our prayers, God our Father directs us to Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ God has dealt with the sin of the whole world.

Romans 5:18-19 puts it very simply and clearly:

Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

All the sons and daughters of Adam have the problem of guilt. It is not simply “guilt feelings” that are our trouble, but the actual problem of guilt before God. All of us stand under a sentence of condemnation. All have sinned, missing the mark of living in the full glory of God. We have failed in righteousness, which has been defined as *the fulfilment of the demands and obligations of a relationship*.⁴ We have all turned our own way, followed our own course and if at any point we have been something like what God has desired for us, it has only been because it suited us, not at all because He has commanded us to do so. In fact, as soon as we know something to be commanded by God, a deep resistance to that rises up in us—“Who does He think is? God or something??” Even if we ever thought a change in this situation would be a good thing, we think this only because it suited us! All of God’s commands and will then stand against us, a permanent pointer to our failure and His glory.

⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Justification By Faith*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2008, p. 24

But this word of God tells us that Jesus Christ has acted on our behalf, to permanently change our status. Jesus was the eternal Son of God joined eternally to our humanity; God made Man. He came in this way to act representatively for us. Just as our previous Head, Adam had failed and led us into bondage of guilt and condemnation, now Jesus Christ intervened as our new Head, the new Adam, the Second Adam, to lead us out of guilt and condemnation into peace and righteousness. Righteousness is here the status of being no longer condemned by God, but rather in the status of being declared, "Not guilty!" It is to have God our Father declare to us, "I do not condemn you!" It is to have Him say to us, "All that I have is yours; you are always with me."

The act of Jesus Christ to establish this righteousness for us was his sacrificial, atoning death on the cross. God our Father presented him as a propitiation for our sins (Rom. 3:25). *Propitiation* is not simply a "pay-off" of the penalty of our sins. An *expiation* will do that. But propitiation recognises that there is more than a debt to pay, but that there is relationship to be mended, that offence and anger has to be removed somehow. When Jesus died on the cross, he bore our sins in his body (1Pet. 2:24), and he bore the opposition of God towards all our sinfulness toward Him. This was an act of obedience to the Father, and by that obedience Jesus has established righteousness for those who have faith in him. After his death, Jesus rose again, and ascended to heaven and sat down at the right hand of his Father, showing that his death had dealt with sin once and for all time (Heb. 10:12).

Those who believe in Christ have all that he has accomplished accounted to them; his status becomes their status. And that accounting is once and for all. In the Old Testament, we are told that Abraham believed God, and that his faith was accounted to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). His faith was not in his own achievements or actions, but in the faithfulness of God to keep His promises. Paul uses that background to tell us who believe in Christ that, God now justifies those who do not work but rather trust God who justifies the wicked. This faith is credited as righteousness. (Rom 4:1-5)

The fruit of this justification is that we will then live righteously and obediently before our Father. However, having said that, it must be constantly remembered that this righteous living and obedience is not then the basis for our continued righteousness. Let us be clear: we do not maintain our righteousness by righteous deeds. Righteous deeds are what God works in us through the Holy Spirit as the fruit of the righteousness given us in Jesus Christ. That righteous status is the gift of God in Jesus Christ, always and forever. Should we sin, then the word of God tells us that the blood of Jesus goes on cleansing us from all unrighteousness, and that Jesus is with the Father always acting as our advocate.

In the battle of the conscience that the Christian faces, we pray for the Holy Spirit to fill us with faith that the things we learn in Scripture will in fact be written deep into us in experience. The Holy Spirit convinces us of justification by showing us Jesus Christ, and the meaning of his death and resurrection, and speaking these things to the conscience, so that the conscience becomes a "good conscience" (1Tim. 1:5). It is a good conscience not because of righteous things that it has done: in fact to go down that track will only lead to hateful, isolating pride or to destructive self-condemnation. It is a good conscience because it has heard a word from outside itself, the word of peace from Jesus Christ: your sins are forgiven; what you cannot undo, I have undone in my dying and rising.

This will save us from becoming driven to “prove it” about our righteousness: we will not have to have some point of reference in ourselves for confidence that we are accepted by the Father. Our point of reference will be outside us, in heaven, where Christ is. We will look not to ourselves to be assured of these things, but will look instead with eager longing to the Word of God to hear these things told us again. As the troubles and trials of memory, of failure, of temptation come to us, “upward we look and see him there who made an end of all my sin.”