

Sermon 43, Clean Flesh, Dirty Conscience, Hebrews 9:1-10

Proposition: The first covenant was an earthly copy of the heavenly reality, and due to its physical-earthly nature it could not cleanse the conscience the way Jesus does.

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Introduction operate

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Hebrew writer continues, in the section before us, to expound the differences between Jesus' priestly work and the priestly work of the Aaronic-Levitical priests. The first fourteen verses of this chapter present a systematic, point-by-point comparison between the old and new covenants across three categories: sanctuary, priest, and worship. As you know by now, the Hebrew writer will end up stating clearly that the new covenant has the advantage in all three categories. We will look at that systematic comparison in more detail next week. Today, though, we are going to look at what the writer says specifically about the tabernacle as the sanctuary of the old covenant. Intriguingly, he labels the tabernacle and its rites as a "parable" (v. 9) and says that the Holy Spirit used this parable to teach a lesson. That lesson is that old covenant worship was earthly and physical, and therefore though it cleansed the body and even made it holy, it could not ease the conscience the way Jesus does. We will look at this in two points: what the first covenant had, and what the first covenant meant.

I. What the First Covenant Had, vv. 1-7

We begin by looking at what the first covenant had. When I was a kid reading the Bible, this passage always used to annoy me. Why does the Hebrew writer so tantalizingly mention the

furniture of the tabernacle, only to hurry on and say he actually can't talk about it? If he knew the spiritual meaning of every piece of furniture, it seemed to me at the time, he jolly well could have shared it and made Exodus come alive like never before!

Well, my older self is much more grateful that the writer did not describe all of these pieces of furniture "in detail." He swears off doing so in v. 5, and he was right: we already have all the detail we could ever need recorded in the book of Exodus and its double account of the furniture in the tabernacle. The meaning of each piece of furniture is pretty obvious if you think about it; we talked about them all recently when we went through Exodus a few months ago, and I will just briefly summarize here.

A. An Earthly Holy Place, vv. 2-5

The first covenant was administered in an earthly holy place. The word "earthly" means "belonging to this cosmos." It is opposed to heavenly, and it can also be translated "worldly" and carry overtones of the bad side of the world, the side that Christians are told in John's first epistle not to love. Clearly, the word "worldly" does not have strongly negative overtones here, but it is also not entirely positive in a context that has been stressing the nature of the old covenant as a physical, earthly copy of non-physical heavenly realities. The heavenly realities that were shadowed forth in the old covenant were translated by God Himself into the physical forms that the writer lists here.

1. Outer Tabernacle: Lampstand, Table, Showbread

He speaks first of the "outer tabernacle," what we typically call "the holy place." Remember, the tabernacle was split by a curtain into two rooms. The first room, as the author is about to tell us, was used daily for worship. The second one could only be entered annually on Yom Kippur.

The first room contained three pieces of furniture. They were the large menorah or seven-branched candlestick that was the symbol of Israelite faith throughout the ancient and medieval periods, and then the twelve loaves of showbread sitting on the table in front of the light. The meaning is clear: in the tabernacle, Israel (the twelve tribes represented by a dozen loaves of bread) basks in the light of God's presence. So here, in the outer room, we see the truth that God's presence with His people is the light of their lives.

2. Holy of Holies: Incense Altar, Ark, Atonement Lid, Cherubim

But if you went farther into the tabernacle, you passed through the inner veil and came into the cubic room where everything was made of gold. This was the Holy of Holies, the *sanctum sanctorum* in Latin, and in this place the presence of God was much more manifest and concentrated than in the outer room. In this respect, of course, the tabernacle was comparable to one of our homes today, in which some rooms count as "public" or relatively accessible and open to all comers, while others are "private" not to be entered without special permission. Kitchens, dining rooms, and bathrooms are public, like the first room of the tabernacle, while closets and especially bedrooms are private and only to be entered by invitation on special occasions and generally not at all. It is entirely possible to have been good friends with someone for years, to have been in their home numerous times, and yet to have never seen their bedroom. That's because it's private. The holy of holies was like that, but even more so.

The furniture items in this room were the core components of Israel's worship. You had the incense altar, to begin with. Technically, it appears that this altar was in the first room, but almost right up against the veil. Physically, it was in the first room, but in terms of use, it belonged in the second room, because incense represents prayer and there is no way into the presence of God without prayer. Better, you can't come into God's presence at all without the reality that incense symbolizes. Yet the incense altar was used in the rituals of Levitical worship on a daily basis and therefore must have been placed in the first room.

Secondly in the holy of holies stood the ark of the covenant along with its atonement lid, the "propitiation," "atonement cover," or "mercy seat" as its name has been variously translated and paraphrased. The ark represents the presence of God Himself, while the mercy seat represents His saving work in Jesus protecting us from the consequences of the broken law.

3. Ark: Manna, Rod, Commandments

We see this even more clearly when we look inside the ark for a moment, as the writer does. In the ark was the rod that demonstrated Aaron's legitimate priesthood over against the rebels who denied it. Alongside that sign of priesthood was some manna in a golden urn, showing the work of Jesus as the bread of life and how God provided for His people in the wilderness. And then, most powerfully of all, the chest contained the second copy of the ten commandments, written again by the finger of God (or Moses) after Israel broke them.

The lid over the law is a sign that God saves us from the majesty of the offended law. The manna and rod point to God's provision of living bread and a living priesthood, along with God's provision of the moral law for an otherwise wandering people.

Finally, the cherubim on the lid of the ark are present as guards in the throne room of God. Their forms, cast in gold, show the truth that God is served by myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands. He is not to be trifled with, but is always more than able to protect Himself and deal with any and all threats to His rule.

Well, that is the writer's extremely brief summary of a subject which occupies about a dozen chapters of Exodus. This is the earthly building and furniture into which the heavenly realities were translated; this is the earthly or worldly sanctuary.

B. Regulations for Worshiping God, vv. 6-7

But, of course, this sanctuary was not given to be self-explanatory. Oh no. Much of Leviticus and some of Numbers are taken up with instruction on how to use all of these items in the worship of God. The Hebrew writer does not repeat the details, for they would make his composition much longer without adding any particular clarity. It was already said perfectly in those books of Moses, and if you want to know more, go read and study them. All the writer tells us is that both the first and second rooms of the tabernacle were used on a regular basis for divine worship. The first room was used daily, the second annually, to representatively bring the people into God's presence and find atonement for sins of ignorance.

That's the short of it. Now we get to the first set of points the author wants to make about this first covenant's place of worship and manner of worship. These things were a parable. What did that parable mean?

II. What the Holy Spirit Signified by the First Covenant, vv. 8-10

Our author says something explicitly that readers of Exodus and Leviticus have known all along: the Holy Spirit was making a point through the tabernacle and the divine worship conducted there. This is not a point Moses was making; it is not a point the Levitical priests were making. Rather, it is a point made by God Himself, by the same Holy Spirit who taught Moses to write the Pentateuch.

A. The Earthly Tabernacle Concealed the Path to God's Presence, v. 8

That point is this: The earthly tabernacle concealed the path to God's presence. The tabernacle was supposed to be, and in fact really was, the place of God's dwelling on earth. It was truly holy. And yet, rather than fully revealing the path into God's presence, the tabernacle actually concealed that path.

We spoke about this at length as we looked at Exodus together over the past three years. The overwhelming impression that Exodus gives the reader is of veils, coverings, a gigantic pile of cloth over the top of the wooden frame. God was as much concealed by the tabernacle as He was revealed.

The way into God's heavenly presence is through the blood of Jesus Christ. If the tabernacle is read — as it was being read by the Hebrews of our author's own day — as an alternative route to God's heavenly presence, then true the way into that heavenly presence is actually concealed by the tabernacle. But even if the tabernacle is simply read as the way in which one can receive the grace of Christ, it is still not the clearest description of the path to heaven. The way into God's heavenly presence is not manifest so long as the tabernacle and its divine service are still standing. Put another way, the veil covering the holy of holies tells a lie once Jesus has come. The path into that holy of holies is actually open now, and insofar as the tabernacle says that it is not, it is concealing the path to God, not fully manifesting it.

The writer is not denying salvation to the tabernacle worshipers. He is simply denying that they had salvation through the tabernacle. They had it through Christ.

B. The Tabernacle Was a Parable, v. 9a

Well, he goes on to say something even more astounding. Those who were paying attention when Jesus died, those who saw or heard about the veil being torn, put two and two together and knew that the tabernacle had not fully revealed the way to God's presence. But now the author adds that the tabernacle was a parable. It was a "symbol," "figure," or "illustration" as the major English translations render it. But the Greek word is "parable", and I see no reason to drop it.

1. It Told a Story about How to Approach God

When the writer says that the tabernacle was a parable, he is saying that it told a story about how to approach God. Like the parables of the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son, the tabernacle taught a lesson through earthly realities. We looked at that story in our Exodus series. Let me just remind you of the piece of furniture that the author doesn't mention here in Heb. 9, and the story it tells.

The bronze altar was unmissable. In a courtyard fifty cubits wide, the altar was five cubits wide. It was only a tenth of the width of the yard, but it was most likely placed dead

center. If you came into the gate, you were confronted first of all with this large inferno, a miniature Hell blazing in front of you. The thing stunk, what with all the blood and hair and hides and burning flesh. I'm not sure how often they cleaned it all, but in the wilderness wanderings at least, they probably weren't putting it through a touchless automatic carwash twice a day. Rather, brothers and sisters, this bronze object about half the size of a Volkswagen Beetle was not the cleanest or most pleasant to the senses. Under the blazing sun of Sinai, even the fire probably didn't feel good most of the time.

Yet you had to walk around the altar to get to the tabernacle door.

God was making a statement. The statement was this: There is no access to My presence without blood sacrifice. Death, and fire consuming the dead, are the way in which you, sinful priest, will come into my presence.

The lesson was unforgettable. The entire institution of the tabernacle, which employed more or less one-twelfth of Israel, or at least one whole tribe, was dedicated to making it clear that only through the death and fiery consumption of an innocent lamb could you come close to God.

Brothers and sisters, I think all of us are saying "Yeah, I get it. Move on." But do you actually get it? Again, the point of the tabernacle is that God is dwelling in the midst of His people. He "moved into the neighborhood," as the Message has it. Now, imagine with me that your next-door neighbor put a large, 7 x 7 foot altar smack in the middle of the sidewalk to his front door, such that you had to walk around it to get there. And on this altar he burned a sheep every morning and every evening without fail.

What would you think of that neighbor? Now, take it one step farther. Imagine that here, in our church, we did that. You come in the front door, and in the foyer, between the front door and the inner sanctuary, a huge altar constantly features a bull carcass burning up? I think most of us would turn around and run back to our cars as fast as possible. I want nothing to do with a church that burns up bulls twice a day.

Brothers and sisters, sacrifice is expensive and unsanitary and gross. But it is also part of the true religion. This is the reality of sin. Sin destroys. Sin wrecks and ruins and burns up good. Sin kills. The worshiper laid his hand on the head of the animal and then slit its throat, as if to say "This is what I deserve. This is what should happen to me."

As one commentator noted, we moderns tend to think of sacrifice as primitive and barbaric. No one should give up anything of earthly value for something so intangible as a religious benefit. But as he pointed out, this logic privileges earth over heaven, the material over the spiritual, the flesh over the soul. Ultimately, it is the society with no organized corporate religion at all, the state where human beings are regarded as soulless — or, at least, as soulless for all practical purposes — which is truly barbaric.

The smoking, stinking altar teaches us that God demands payment for sin, and that sin brings death. There is no way into His presence without death.

We keep a vestige of that in our church buildings today by hanging up a cross. We have an instrument of torture and death prominently displayed in most of our church buildings. Some

denominations even keep the suffering Christ on it. It's not quite as visceral as the altar actually burning up bull after bull and sheep after sheep, but it sends a similar message. There is no life in the presence of God without a sacrificial death.

2. That Approach Required Sacrifices, v. 9b

That, of course, is the point of the parable of the tabernacle which the writer now emphasizes. In the parable that was a tabernacle, there were sacrifices, bulls and sheep and goats killed and burned to take away the just wrath of a holy God.

a) Earthly Sanctuary, Earthly Sacrifices

The sanctuary was earthly; it was a physical copy of the heavenly realities. And thus, the sacrifices offered there were earthly too. The writer does not specify these, because they all fall into material categories.

b) Food, Drink, Washings, v. 10a

He lists them under three headings: food, drink, washings. Animals, bread, grain, fruit, among the foods; wine and oil for the drinks; and the washings in the laver and all the rules about washing your clothes in water, bathing, and being unclean until the evening. These things are a huge part of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. They were part and parcel of the tabernacle and its worship.

c) For the Body, not the Conscience, v. 10b

Yet, if you haven't noticed, every one of them relates to the body, not the conscience. They can't cleanse your conscience from guilt and shame. They can only cleanse your body from ceremonial defilement, not your soul from moral defilement. The big bronze altar was impressive and suggestive — it was a powerful parable. But if you looked at it, could you really be satisfied in your conscience that it was destroying your sin? If so, you were lying to yourself.

3. But those Sacrifices Could Not Perfect the Worshiper's Conscience, v. 9c

Those sacrifices could not perfect the worshiper's conscience. Far from it. The word *conscience* doesn't even appear in the Old Testament! You'll find the English word in the NASB, saying "David's conscience smote him" in 1 Sam 24:5, but it translates the Hebrew *leb* which means "heart." One commentator accuses the Hebrew writer of moving the goalposts. How is it fair to indict the Levitical system for failing to cleanse the conscience when cleansing the conscience was never the point of that system?

C. The Parable's Point: One Cannot Enter God's Presence with a Filthy Conscience

The response to this is only too obvious. In the Levitical system as in the new covenant, the central command is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. As John Brown rightly points out in his commentary, that is impossible for a guilty man. You can't come into God's presence with a filthy conscience! The point of the Levitical system was clearly to bring worshipers into the presence of God. Yes, this entrance to God's presence was only virtual, with the high priest carrying the names of all Israel on precious stones on his shoulders and chest. But it was an entry of some kind to the presence of God. That entry demands a clean conscience.

When you feel guilty, you don't want to be in God's presence. You want to be as far from His presence as you can be. And so to point out the obvious — everything in the Levitical system is targeted at the body, not the conscience — is not to move the goalposts. It's to point out that this system is and in some sense always was inadequate to prepare us for the presence of God.

When you feel guilty, you hide. That's what Adam and Eve did and that's what we do too. Only through the consciousness of God's forgiveness for us in Christ can we, do we, dare to come into the presence of the Living God.

This relates to last Sunday's sermon. One of the best ways to dirty your conscience is to refuse to forgive. You can't hold a grudge against your fellow man and have a clean conscience at the same time. That's why Paul and Jesus tell us that we must forgive. All the work that the Son of God did to allow access to the presence of God is negated when you insist on hanging on to your sin. So don't do it! Instead, listen to the good news.

D. The Good News: The Time of Reformation Has Come in Christ, v. 11

The good news is that the time of Reformation has come. In Christ, our consciences are cleansed, our lives turned around, our hearts healed. We know that God is pleased with us, not through the blood of bulls and goats but through the blood of Christ.

Could OT saints know this? Certainly they could. "By this I know that Thou art pleased with me, Because my enemy does not shout in triumph over me" (Psa 41:11 NAS). David knew that God was pleased with him. His conscience was clear. But that knowledge was not derived from his use of the Levitical system, but rather from the victory over betrayal that God had given to him (see Ps. 41:9-10).

You can and should have a clean conscience all the time! If your Christianity is primarily about the body, what you eat, what you drink, when and how you wash, you have missed the time of reformation. It's here, and the primary skill of the Christian life is learning how to go to your Father and have Him wash your conscience. You are clean in Jesus. Live like it, and keep clean —and keep cleansing — by the Spirit's power. That means walking in love and forgiving those who have wronged you, just as God in Christ has forgiven you. Amen.