



## Gospel / Life

### Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

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

#### **Study 12: The Sin Offering as a Pattern for Christian Life (1)**

What is the pattern for our spirituality that we learn from the sin offering?

##### **Nothing more than sinners, nothing less than justified**

We may fail to understand how deeply we have been affected by the rise and dominance of psychological thinking in the past century. The basic “ideal” for human beings now seems to be that we be “well-adjusted” – that is, that we have a level and calm approach to life, and that we are not shaken by events or live with internal turmoil and conflict. Security, satisfaction with oneself, self-acceptance, self-confidence, and self-esteem are marks of the well-adjusted person. Guilt or shame is seen as pathological and needing a cure. Anything which causes guilt is assumed to be bad.

In Christian circles we may face this in another way. It is true that Christ has come to liberate us by justifying us from our sins. He has dealt with the guilt of our sins by his sacrificial death as the sin offering. This may lead us to think then that anything that causes us to feel guilty is a bad thing, and not proper to our Christian experience.

In fact though, the truer description of the Christian is given in Romans 7. I am so glad this chapter is in the New Testament! It spells out the normal Christian life, and the ongoing experience we have of struggle and pain due to the knowledge of sin, and of release and joy due to the knowledge of grace. Already Paul has established clearly that by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, for atonement, God has justified us freely (Rom. 3:21-26), and that the gift of righteousness comes to us entirely as a gift and not as reward for some accomplishment on our part (Rom. 4). The death and resurrection of Jesus are the events by which we have been saved from sin’s dominating condemnation and which open up for us the possibility of a life obedient and pleasing to God (Rom. 5-6). The power for our lives as living sacrifices is the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Against this is the basic drive in all human beings (even justified Christians!) to find personal validation not in the verdict of God given in Christ, but in our own accomplishments and actions. We use “the law”, and especially the Law of God if we have a religious bent, and measure our validation according to how we assess ourselves by that law. When we believe ourselves to be “below par” we then call the law in as our spur: “I should be...” and trust that the knowledge of what ought to be done will provide the power to do it. In fact, Paul says that this is something that the law, even the Law of God is not able to do—it cannot liberate us from sin’s power and empower us to obey God because it has been “weakened by the flesh” (Rom. 8:3). The law in fact arouses the various sinful passions that we seek to avoid (Rom.

7:5) and without it giving us power to obey God those passions bear fruit in disobedience and sin. Paul says:

Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. (Rom. 7:8-11)

It is not that the law is, for this reason, a bad thing. It is a good thing, a wonderful gift of God that is to be honoured and treasured. “The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (Rom. 7:12). More, even the exposing and stirring up of sin by the law is a good thing—it is a good reality check:

What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.”... Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognised as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful. (Rom. 7:7-8, 13)

Paul says that, as a Christian, the same dynamic happens when he seeks to find in the law’s requirements the power to obey God. As a Christian he finds that sin is stronger than the law, because he in and of himself is unspiritual, despite the spiritual nature of the law (Rom. 7:14). (When he says that the law is spiritual, I believe he means that the law is from God, and is the outward description of life in the Spirit.) When he is caught in the crossfire between sin and law, he is seen as he is of himself, a slave to sin. (The condemnation that this brings is used by Satan to further ensnare Christians in sin, that he might somehow lead them to destruction.) Paul describes this slavery this way:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I now that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil that I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war with the members of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death!? (Rom. 7:15-24)

Last week we saw that the sin offering was for those occasions of “unintentional sin”. We looked last week how we may be insensitive to sin in our lives, and how the revelation of that sin in us can be a devastating thing. We saw that the blood of Jesus as the sin offering goes on cleansing us from all sin. Here in Paul’s discussion in Romans 7 we see another aspect of “unintentional sin”. Paul finds the tension of not wanting to sin and yet finding that he, in and of himself, is unable to avoid sin. There is a kind of unintentionality when in our inner being we delight in God’s law, but find another power at work in our actual living.

With Paul we can praise God in this situation, for whilst we ourselves cannot deliver ourselves, even with large doses of the law, even with the all the lists of what ought to be done that we can conjure up, in fact in Jesus Christ our Lord God has delivered us from this body of death! “Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:25). Through Jesus Christ, and the gift of the life-giving Spirit, God Himself works powerfully in, setting us free from the law of sin and death. Jesus was God’s Son, given to us full identification with us, who bore our sins in his body, who was made

sin for us—he was made a sin offering and condemned and finished off sin. As we live in him, with his Spirit now filling and empowering us through our union with Jesus, we find that the righteous requirements of the law are met in us: somehow we start to walk as we ought, with having the “ought” over us as a big stick! (Rom. 8:1-4)

### **Implications**

There are some implications for our ongoing Christian life in this. Firstly, it will be perfectly normal and right for a Christian to have peaks and troughs in his or her life, rather than the so-called “ideal” of the steady, even walk of assured faith. We will have times of desperation as Paul indicates in his cry of anguish, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” There will be times when the disappointment, shame and guilt of our failure to obey God will press in upon us and pin us under its crushing weight. It is right then and there that it is blessedness indeed to know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. It may be that we learn at these times to resort to Christ, to entrust ourselves to him, to remember and call on the reality of his blood shed once for all for the sins of the whole world, more and more quickly as we grow in maturity. But maybe too, there will be times when that sense of anguish is prolonged and deep. We hold to the word of Christ but it is holding it in the deepest gloom and we struggle to see the light that it brings in that darkness. This is not entirely a bad thing. It is better to have this than to have no sense of the awfulness and vileness of our sinning.

That leads to a second implication: at times it is necessary for God’s law to do its work in us and to expose us. There is nothing sadder than self-deceived Christians, those times when we assume that holiness and righteousness pretty well match our behaviour, when we work on the basic (unstated, because that wouldn’t be very humble!) assumption that most Christians would be better off if they were more like us! How good for the work of God’s law in its exposing of sinfulness in us. Thank Him for that work when it comes to you. The crushing, the guilt, the shame that follow such a work are not all bad. Better that they come than that we continue in our self-deception! At such times, we are to do what Israel was called to do, to acknowledge that we are sinners. Confession of sin is rightly a regular part of the Christian’s life before God the Father. It is not that we are “keeping short accounts with God”—we are not earning forgiveness by our confession. Rather, we confess out of the knowledge of His provision of His Son for our sin offering. Christian spirituality avoids hypocrisy through a fairly ruthless and honest estimation of ourselves. No rose-tinted glasses as we look into the mirror of God’s holy law!

The Christian is one who will receive by faith all that the Lord has done on his or her behalf in Jesus Christ. In the sin offering, the offerer did nothing other than identify himself (or his family or nation) with the animal, and then confess that he deserved death by cutting the animal’s throat. It was the priests, not the offerer, who then took the blood, burned the fat and dealt with the animal to make atonement. We are taught to have a spirituality which confesses our inability to do anything about our sins, and to joyfully and thankfully receive all that God our Father has done for us in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Christian spirituality is not then a static state of bliss but rather a dynamic series of oscillations between highs and lows, knowledge of sin and knowledge of forgiveness, repentance and assurance—and all of these are the means by which God our Father draws us closer and closer to Christ and enables us to know more and more the wonders of the grace that is ours in Him.

Psalm 116 speak about this very richly:

I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.  
Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.

The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me;  
I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.  
Then I called on the name of the LORD: "O LORD, save me!"

The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.  
The LORD protects the simple-hearted; when I was in great need, he saved me.  
Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.

For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death,  
my eyes from tears,  
my feet from stumbling,  
that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.

I believed; therefore I said, "I am greatly afflicted."  
And in my dismay I said, "All men are liars."

How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?  
I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.  
I will fulfil my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.  
Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.  
O LORD, truly I am your servant;  
I am your servant, the son of your maidservant;  
you have freed me from my chains.  
I will sacrifice a thank-offering to you and call on the name of the LORD.  
I will fulfil my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people,  
in the courts of the house of the LORD—in your midst, O Jerusalem.

Praise the LORD.