

Message in a Bottle, pt. 2: (Christ For Us)

A sermon by Larry Kirkpatrick

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In our first presentation, we likened the gospel to a message in a bottle: something precious from long ago, sent to you personally across the void. God sends this message to every man, woman, and child. And yet, what is our understanding? Instead of a true message, too often, we hear but stale cliches. God sends something so important to us, and we assume that all that we have heard concerning it is “gospel”? Jesus dies for us, in our place, fulfills a legal obligation on our behalf. End of story.

But maybe not. . .

Sacrifice or Obedience?

The Bible has much to say. We take care, or become one-sided listeners. Like the boiled frog, we may have unawares been led to think that God prefers sacrifice. Consider Scriptures that challenge this.

And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams (1 Samuel 15:22).

Samuel’s statement is unambiguous. To obey is better than to sacrifice. In the incident in question, Saul’s disobedience cost him his crown. Today, how common to harangue those who teach obedience. This would not have been appreciated by the prophet Samuel. He states not his own preference but the Lord’s. “Hath *the Lord* as great delight . . .”

The testimony of 1 Samuel 15 does not stand alone. Consider Psalm 51:16, 17:

Thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: Thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

What? God does not desire sacrifice? This is stronger than 1 Samuel 15. In Psalms, we see that God is for sacrifice, but notice the sacrifice that He is for: a broken spirit and a contrite heart; righteousness alive in the life, not in dead, blood-drained creatures.

There is more. See Proverbs 21:3 ESV:

To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.

This matches the marginal reading of the KJV, a perfect echo of Psalm 51. Heaven prefers godly behavior to bandaging disobedience.

Later in the Bible, Jesus is engaged in discussion, and common ground is found. The scribe says

To love Him [God] with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mark 12:33).

Jesus replies, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

In every case, obedience is preferred to sacrifice.

Made Sin on Our Behalf

Hebrews 10:4 reminds us that it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin. Only one sacrifice that can do this. Consider 2 Corinthians 5:21 NASB:

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

When Jesus dies for us it is not only to meet a penalty, not only to forgive. If anything, that is secondary. Forgiveness, after all, is only a half-way house, a temporary arrangement.

Forgiveness has to do with sin. How much sinning will there be in the new earth?

Not that forgiveness is unimportant; only that it plays a crucial—yet temporary—role. Forgiveness is part of the divine plan to discontinue sinning and all its deformations. God’s law does not go away any more than His character goes away. It is God versus sin, not God versus law.

Look at the text. God the Father made Jesus to be sin for us. He and Jesus arranged that Jesus would voluntarily take the punishment of our sins upon Himself. The Innocent consented to endure what otherwise would justly have been ours.

My sentence of death had to be carried out, yes. But Jesus came to a man of dust and gently pushed me aside. He laid down on my cross and stretched out His hands, and was lifted up. He hung naked between heaven and earth, with each shuddering breath, pulling Himself up by nail-pierced hands. He could not sense His father’s presence. He suffered, as far as His own experience, utterly alone.

Jesus became sin on our behalf. The consequence of sin is death. Neither Father nor Son nor Holy Spirit set aside that consequence. Although preferring obedience to sacrifice, the Father and Jesus agreed and sacrifice was offered. Romans 5:8 makes it clear: “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” We do not make the sacrifice, it is offered in our behalf.

However, right here certain theologies go into meltdown. They stop before coming Christ’s ultimate purpose for us.

We Become the Righteousness of God?

The last portion of the statement is that He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, “so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

Although Jesus did not actually sin, He actually took in our behalf the punishment of sin that was ours. Likewise, although we were not actually righteous, Jesus actually gives to us the righteousness that was His. But here comes a problem. Remember, God prefers what?—Yes, obedience—to sacrifice.

Why does Jesus experience the punishment of sin? Because of actual sins that I have committed. That is, because of actual chosen rebellion. Now follow this. For one to be made the righteousness of God in Him, there must be a manifestation of righteousness. Righteousness does not just float around in some expanse of nothingness as a vague idea; righteousness is revealed in actions, else it is nothing, as James points out. So, if I am made the righteousness of God in Him, what can this mean?

In Romans 1:17 Paul says the “righteousness of God” is “revealed.” In 3:21 it is “manifested.” And in James 1:20, it is pointed out that the wrath of man does not “work” the righteousness of God. Righteousness can be nothing less than actual right-doing. If we are made the righteousness of God in Him, it is inescapable that as persons who have accepted Christ’s sacrifice for us, we become “right-doers.” If right-doing is not at our core, then we are not at one with Christ at His core.

God Does Not Give Indulgences

Obedience is better than sacrifice; with this we must agree. Right-doing is better than wrong. It had been better if man had not sinned. But we all have. We came pitifully short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23). So we damaged ourselves. After thousands of years of degeneration, every member of our race is born with a bent to evil in us awaiting only our exercise of choice to fan it into full-scale rebellion. This we have done. At the Holy Spirit’s urging, many repent. The

question then becomes, How deep does our commitment to moral renovation go? God alone can read the heart, but sentient beings can see our actions. Jesus' death on the cross gives us opportunity to manifest them.

Jesus' death on the cross is a necessary step in bringing His people along to complete moral realignment. God is removing sin and its effects from His creation. And "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" (Hebrews 9:27, 28 NRSV). Jesus' death on the cross is much more about sin removal than about paying for sin.

God does not give indulgences. There is no moral price that can be paid to God so that an immoral act can be passed off as a good one. His death on the cross is part of His larger plan to remove sin from His universe.

Jesus Dies to Set Us Free

What then do we do with the texts which explicitly mention Jesus' sacrifice for us as a ransom payment (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6)? The underlying words here are the same as used for paying the price necessary to set a slave free.

Is it not true that we have chosen slavery and that we need to be set free? Have we not been tied up in the most profoundly tangled knot of the cords of our own sins (Proverbs 5:22)? He not only makes offer, but at the cross, cuts those cords.

Are we slaves? In bondage? Hebrews says that Jesus took our humanity, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives (Hebrews 2:14, 15 NASB).

Satan still exists, he can still harass, but Jesus has the keys of death and of hades—keys He did not hold before His resurrection and exaltation (Philippians 2:6-11).

Jesus had to live without sinning and offer up His life for us in order to strip Satan of His power. First Corinthians 5:7 makes Christ our passover. But pay attention now to the rest of this verse:

Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our passover also has been sacrificed (1 Corinthians 5:7 NASB).

Through Christ's sacrifice the leaven is removed. Through Christ we are without the leavening of sin. His sacrifice has meant for us the removal of sin. Remember from Exodus how God's people then slew the sacrifice and applied its blood to their doorposts and the angel of death passed over their homes but slew the firstborn of the Egyptians who had neither sacrificed nor obeyed? Our understanding of the cross gains much from an understanding of the passover. Do you see how both are important—sacrifice and obedience? For when they applied the blood, the Hebrews did both: they made sacrifice, and they obeyed.

Rising in Newness of Life

But perhaps we recall a line in the Bible that says we are crucified with Christ. Read it with me at Romans 6:6, 7:

Our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves of sin; for he who has died is freed from sin (Romans 6:6, 7 NASB).

That is, Jesus' death on the cross is so closely identified with us as to make us new. He rises in newness of life, and we rise in newness of life. Jesus' death on our behalf is a

reconciling, an exchange. I am crucified with Christ, but I am also resurrected with Him. Do we find this hard to believe? Go up to Romans 6:11. There we have

Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord (KJV)

Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Jesus Christ (NASB)

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (NRSV and ESV)

The meaning here is to consider oneself as actuality being dead to sin and alive to God through one's connection with Christ. Does this mean we cannot sin? No. It means that so long as we keep in close connection with Him, we live the life of victory. Because Jesus came and lived and died and rose again our sins have been removed and we walk in newness of life. Old things are passed away, all things (with reference to the believer indwelt by the Holy Spirit) are new.

Which brings us to John 1:29, where John the Baptist points to Jesus and calls on the crowd to see Him as the Lamb of God "which taketh away the sin of the world." There we are again: Jesus came to remove sin. His death for us on the cross was necessary to bring about this removal.

Conclusion

The good news is not that Jesus paid a legal penalty on your behalf at the cross, but that at the cross, Jesus made possible the removal of sin from us. Without this, we would be without hope. But Christ is for us. He is not content merely to pay a penalty, remove the guilt, and leave

us sinning and asking forgiveness, sinning and asking forgiveness, sinning and asking forgiveness, like a deep sore that continues to bleed.

Was Jesus' death a payment made to Satan? God owes nothing to Satan. Was it a payment made to the Father? This is often said, but we might better think think of it in terms of an extraordinary sacrifice endured by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which made possible Jesus' becoming sin for us so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. Christ for us makes reconciliation.

Jesus' death on the cross is central in His removal of sin. Which brings us back to the question of obedience versus sacrifice. Jesus' sacrifice makes possible our present (and ultimately, eternal) obedience—a line of truth we will wrestle with in our study next time, in part three of *Message in a Bottle: Christ in us*.

Biographical note: Larry Kirkpatrick has served in the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church since 1994. He is a pastor of the American West, having led churches in Nevada, Utah, California, and Idaho. His writings include the books *Real Grace for Real People*, and *Cleanse and Close*. Larry and wife Pamela presently serve in the Upper Columbia Conference, ministering to the [Bonners Ferry](#) and Clark Fork churches in the incomparable beauty of Northern Idaho.