

HE CAME FOR SINNERS

TEXT: 1 JOHN 3:5

December 2, 2012

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

On August 1, 1521, Martin Luther wrote a letter to Philip Melanchthon, his friend and colleague, to encourage him in his faith and battle with sin. Luther wrote,

If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true and not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for He is victorious over sin, death, and the world," ("To Philip Melanchthon Wartburg, August 1, 1521," *Luther's Works*, vol. 48, p. 282).

What was Luther seeking to teach Melanchthon?

First, to be sure, Luther was not granting Melanchthon a license to sin (i.e., "sin boldly"). Luther wasn't telling Melanchthon, "Sin with shameless unconcern. Do whatever you please. Don't be afraid of sinning. We sin and Jesus forgives." Opponents of Luther have often accused him of granting people a license to sin. Paul dealt with this destructive misunderstanding of the gospel as well. For example, in Romans 5:20, Paul teaches the Roman believers, "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more," (Rom. 5:20). He then anticipated the false charge of license and writes, "¹ What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"

Following Paul, far from issuing a license for Melanchthon to live in sin (i.e., indulge in unrestrained license), Luther was actually encouraging Melanchthon on two levels. First, he was calling him to be a faithful preacher of grace (see W.H.T. Dau, *Luther Examined and Reexamined: A Review of Catholic Criticism and a Plea for Reevaluation*, pp. 94-95). As one who was called to proclaim grace to others, Melanchthon needed to be encouraged to preach the gospel of grace without any limitations or conditions.

Many people think that preaching justification by grace through faith alone overthrows holy living. Pastors are afraid to preach grace without limits because they think they will turn people into lawless people. And so, the temptation is to somehow limit grace or put conditions on believers in order to get them to really obey God's law—"Grace is free, but..." The gospel is not a doctrine according to ungodliness. On the contrary, in Titus 1:1, Paul argues that the gospel is the doctrine according to godliness. In Titus 2:12-13, Paul states that the gospel of grace is "¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-

controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ..."

In addition, as Dr. Dau points out, if Melancthon didn't require a strong faith in the forgiving grace of God for himself—and he most certainly did as we will see—he needed it as a teacher of grace to others (Ibid, p. 95). I often hear people say, "I don't struggle with legalism. I don't doubt God's favor toward me. I don't struggle with a nagging conscience or ever lack assurance. I don't need to repeatedly hear the gospel." There are at least two responses to those who say such things.

First, count it a blessing that you have been given so much grace to be so aware of God's goodness and favor toward you. Use this as an opportunity to help the masses of believers who do struggle. Second, the fact that you don't struggle and are not acutely aware of your sin and failures is either evidence of much grace or evidence that you have never truly understood the extent and exacting demands of God's law for your life. Q. 115 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, "115. Q. If in this life no one can keep the ten commandments perfectly, why does God have them preached so strictly?" Here's the first part of the answer, "First, that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature, and therefore seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ." So, the first thing Luther sets out to do is to thoroughly convince Melancthon, as a preacher of grace, of the extent and power of God's grace, in order to help others in their struggles and to properly motivate them to live godly rather than lawless lives.

Personally, the issue Luther was addressing was Melancthon's excessive-introspection. Melancthon, as Luther himself had done, was magnifying his sins out of proportion due to unbelief. Yes, our sorrow over sin ought to be deep. There is an appropriate and necessary response of Godly sorrow to our sin (cf. 2 Cor. 7:8-11). But, God is not pleased with excessive sorrow, for which there is no reason. We should grieve over real sins yet only for a while (2 Cor. 7:8). We should not, however, continue in a state of grief, for which there is no reason. For example, Melancthon daily worried about issues like, "I wonder whether I trust in Christ enough? Do I really trust in Him alone to save me?"

Once we have repented, we are to immediately receive the comfort of the gospel. In 2 Corinthians 2:7, Paul warns the Corinthians against the danger of excessive sorrow. Concerning the man who repented of his sin, he exhorts, "so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." God in Christ is not a melancholy God and He does not expect us to be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow! Martin Luther offers the following warning against excessive sorrow, "For God is not pleased with sadness, for which there is no reason. The sorrow over our sins is brief and at the same time is made pleasant to us by the promise of grace and the forgiveness of sins. But the other sorrow is of the devil and without promise; it is sheer worry over useless and impossible things which concern God," (Ibid, p. 90).

Like Melanchthon, many today are guilty of falling prey to the “paralysis of analysis” and are therefore overwhelmed by excessive sorrow many times for which there is no reason. This is particularly true for believers who are serious about the Christian life. The consciences of growing Christians become increasingly sensitive to their daily failure to live up to the requirements of God’s law. For example, even as believers we are far from being perfect parents. We know that we do not pray for our children as faithfully and consistently as we should. We know that we do not have family devotions and teach our children the Bible as regularly as we should. We know that in our marriages we often fail to set forth an example of godliness to our children. We are not always as patient, kind, helpful and sacrificial as we should be toward our children or spouse. We know that we sometimes administer discipline to our children because of our own public embarrassment rather than in a spirit of love. We know what we “ought” to do but we see ourselves constantly failing in our duty.

Consequently, what happens is we begin to become paralyzed in our Christian life because of an unhealthy “descent into our own hearts.” All we can hear is our consciences continually indicting us for our failures. Moreover, we become increasingly aware not only of our specific acts of sin but we begin to realize our sinfulness. However, because of an unhealthy inward focus we find it difficult to believe that Jesus has and will continue to forgive us and not hold our sins against us.

We begin to afflict ourselves with all manner of tyrannical questions and thoughts, “Have I prayed enough? Did I read my Bible long enough? I should have bought a hamburger for \$5 instead of a steak for \$20. I should have given to the clothing drive instead of purchasing that new shirt. If I really loved God I would sell all that I have and go be “radical” for God on the mission field.” And, on and on and on the list goes. There is a constant nag always present in the back of our minds, “You haven’t done enough. I need to do more.” So, like Melanchthon, we begin to magnify our sins out of proportion due to unbelief. We become paralyzed in our Christian life due to excessive sorrow for which there is no reason.

The fact is everything we do in our lives is far, far from a perfect performance. We can never “do” enough. So, after receiving letter after letter from Melanchthon along these lines, Luther had had it! So, he wrote back, “Melanchthon, be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly!” We will never do enough and we will never stop sinning until the consummation of God’s kingdom. But, the good news is God in Christ is exceedingly gracious and takes away our sins! He hears our imperfect prayers. He blesses our mixed-motive efforts. He uses us despite our imperfect examples.

The problem, however, was that Melanchthon was “inward-oriented” in a way that Luther was not. As a result, he was afflicted and burdened by morbid self-incrimination. A melancholy spirit paralyzed him. He was overwhelmed by excessive sorrow, which is destructive to the Christian life. Here is Dr. Dau describes

the paralysis of morbid introspection, “When the mind is in a morbid state it imagines faults, errors, sins, where there are none. The melancholy person in his self-scrutiny becomes an intolerant tyrant to himself. He will flay his poor soul for trifles as if they were the blackest crimes: In such moments the devil is very busy about the victim of gloom and despair” (Ibid, p. 93).

Luther was trying to keep Melanchthon from becoming an intolerant tyrant to himself. He was trying to shake Melanchthon out of his constant excessive introspection (i.e., his self-centered “inward checking” as to the true state of his soul). Luther was not against the biblical practice of self-examination. Clearly, the Scriptures call us to examine ourselves (2 Cor. 13:5; 2 Pet. 1:10). When it comes to self-examination, we must do it in such a way that it strengthens our life of faith rather than hindering and destroying it. Walter Marshall, in the 1600s, gave the same advice to his Scottish congregation. He wrote,

When you examine yourself, do it with great assurance of faith. Even though you presently find your heart more wicked and deceitful than you ever imagined (as all of God’s greatest servants have always found), the door of mercy is open for you. God will certainly save you forever if you put your trust in His grace through Christ. This confident assurance is what true saving faith is all about. You can have true confidence of God’s favor because of the free promises of the gospel—even when you walk in darkness, and you can see no shining light in your own qualifications. If you will examine yourself with this kind of confidence, it will make you impartial—you will not be afraid to find out the worst about yourself. You will be willing to admit that your own heart is more deceitful than anything else, and desperately wicked, beyond what you can even imagine (Jeremiah 17:9). You will also be able to see that any holiness you do have is because you are presently in a state of God’s grace,” (*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, pp. 197-198).

What then was Luther against? Luther was against was excessive, continual self-incrimination for which there was no reason. He was seeking to teach Melanchthon that the Christian life is to be lived with an outward focus rather than a constant inward focus. Melanchthon’s constant “checking” was really a thinly veiled spiritual cloak of self-righteousness and self-centeredness. Morbid introspection paralyzes our Christian life and is displeasing to God. We must be aware of the danger that comes from morbid introspection. It is the fruit of unbelief (i.e., trusting in self-examination rather than in Christ alone for the forgiveness of our sins).

Like Melanchthon, we need to be reminded to stop living with a constant inward/subjective focus and instead live with an objective/Christ-centered focus. No good comes from constantly descending into our hearts in order to try and root out every possible sinful tendency and desire. This is an exercise in futility! Our hearts are in endless abyss of iniquity. No amount of inward “checking” can ever cleanse our hearts of sin. “The heart,” declares the prophet Jeremiah, “is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it,” (Jer. 17:9). Continual,

excessive introspection is an exercise in futility. Martin Luther writes, “Take the people of Israel as an example: they overcame the serpents, not by looking at them and wrestling with them, but by turning their eyes away from them and looking in a different direction, namely, at the brazen serpent, and they conquered,” (Ibid, p. 89). Likewise, we must be continually reminded that the whole gospel is outside of us! We must look outwardly to Christ living, dying and rising for us rather than to some “inward state of soul” as the basis for our assurance. In fact, even on the “best day” of our Christian life, the apostle Paul says in Galatians 5:17 that what we will find is a constant state of war in our souls. Walter Marshall writes,

Being in a state of grace does not mean you have to deny there are fleshly, sinful desires within you. You know how the flesh lusts against the desires of the Holy Spirit, and how the Holy Spirit fights against the flesh within you. Do not think you are a mere infant in Christ because you find yourself to actually be more fleshly and sinful than you ever thought, and that sometimes you see the old man to be bigger than the new man (Galatians 5:17),” (*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, p. 198).

It is precisely because of this ongoing war with our flesh that we need to be repeatedly exhorted look outside of ourselves to Christ alone. At times it seems to us that our old man is bigger than our new man and that the incessant desires of our flesh will defeat us. This is why we need to hear the good news that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires,” (Gal. 5:24). Though the desires our flesh incessantly wage war against us, we will prevail! We need to hear the comfort of good news, “¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.” The voice of God in the gospel is comfort, only! We must be directed to look again and again to Christ’s living, dying and rising again for all of our sin. The more comforted we are the more obedient we will be!

In brief, Luther is reminding Melanchthon of a fundamental truth of the gospel, namely that Jesus came for sinners—not fictitious sinners but real sinners! He came to save us from our sins—real vile, wicked, shameful, sins, everyone of them, past, present and future! In 1 Timothy 1:16, Paul writes, “But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life.” Simply put, if God could save Paul, He can save anyone! As long as a person has breath, he or she is not beyond the saving grace of God! If grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin because Jesus didn’t come to save people who are only fictitious sinners. He said, “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance,” (Lk. 5:32).

Luther was encouraging Melanchthon (and us!) to live with the assurance that no sin will separate him from His Savior. It is on the basis of this gospel-centered

assurance that we are driven to renounce sin and practice righteousness rather than indulge in a life of license.

LESSON:

The apostle John taught this truth in 1 John 3:5. He writes, “You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.” In the context of v. 5 (3:4-9), John is showing how a Christian—by living with an outward-oriented, objective focus—is motivated to renounce sin (vv. 6, 9) and practice righteousness (v. 7) rather than indulge in a life of unrestrained license (v. 7; see Smalley, *WBC*, pp. 151ff.). In v. 5, John gives two fundamental truths about the gospel, which demonstrate Jesus’ opposition to sin. These two truths serve as the proper motivation to drive us to renounce sin and practice righteousness.

John is calling our attention to a fundamental aspect of the gospel, which all believers “know.” What is it that we know (or ought to know!)? John says the gospel proclaims that Jesus appeared “in order to take away sins...” The word “appeared” (φανερώω) refers to Jesus’ Incarnation—God assuming human nature. God’s opposition to sin is seen in the purpose of Christ’s incarnation (the taking away of our sins).

The Incarnation is the center of Christology. It is the faith of the church, which is summarized in the Chalcedonian Creed (451), “We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man...”

The Incarnation is awe-inspiring. It is a mystery and beyond human comprehension that our Mediator is both a true and righteous man, and at the same time true God in and as one person. Why did God assume our human nature? John says we know that He did so “in order to take away sins.” Gregory of Nazianzus correctly stated, “What He did not assume He did not redeem.” The first advent of Christ reminds us of this fundamental truth of the gospel, namely that Jesus assumed full human nature to take away our sins.

The gospel proclaims that Jesus “appeared” not in anger or wrath, but in grace and mercy. In His first Advent, He came not to punish, but to save. In John 3:17, John writes, “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.”

John doesn’t tell us exactly how Jesus took away our sins. However, his words imply a reference to the cross. When John writes, “You know that he appeared in order to take away sins,” John probably has in mind the pronouncement of John the Baptist who said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,” (cf. Jn. 1:29; see Smalley, *WBC*, p. 156).

1. JESUS DIED FOR US AS OUR SUBSTITUTE TO TAKE AWAY OUR SINS. v. 5A

Jesus, John says, is the “Lamb of God” prepared for the slaughter. God’s law contains both precepts and penalties—precepts to be obeyed and penalties for the slightest failure to do so. On the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 16), two male goats were chosen and the High Priest would cast lots over them. One was chosen to be killed and its blood sprinkled on the mercy seat. The other was chosen to be the scapegoat. The High Priest would lay his hands on the scapegoat and confess the sins of the people typifying the transferring of all their sins to the goat. The goat would then be sent away into the wilderness never to be seen again thus symbolically carrying away the people’s sins. Both goats typify Christ’s death on the cross and show how Christ takes away our sin.

The first goat typified Christ’s *propitiation*. In 1 John 2:2, John reminds sinning Christians (v. 1) that Jesus, “... is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” Jesus is the only Savior for sinners. There is no other. Through His substitutionary death on the cross Jesus fully exhausted the wrath of God against us for our law breaking. By His death, Jesus fully satisfied the justice of God held against us for our sins. The second goat typified Christ’s *expiation*, the once-and-for-all removal of our sins from God’s presence. Psalm 103:12 says, “as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions/rebellion from us.” Jerry Bridges, commenting on the significance of this expression, writes, “Probably it was a cultural idiom signifying as great a distance as human vocabulary can express. Practically, it expresses an infinite distance. This is what God has done with our sin. Jesus not only bore our sins on the cross, He carried them away an infinite distance. He removed them from the presence of God and from us forever,” (*The Gospel for Real Life*, p. 63).

By His death, Jesus takes away our sins forever from God’s presence forever. John says this is why Jesus “appeared.” And, not only has He taken away our sins from His presence forever, He has also chosen to remember them no more! In Jeremiah 31:34 (Heb. 8:12), God promises in the New Covenant, “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” God can’t forget our sin; He knows all things (Ps. 139:1-6; 147:5; Heb. 4:13). When God says He will not remember our sins, it means that He has chosen to not bring them to His mind again! That He remembers our sin no more simply further underscores the fact that Jesus has taken away our sins! It is God’s way of assuring our hearts of Jesus’ full and complete forgiveness! Jerry Bridges writes, “What an overwhelming thought! What joy this should bring to our hearts. Think of some of your more recent sins—sins of which you are now ashamed. It may have been an unkind word, a resentful attitude, or a lustful thought. Whatever it might be, God says He has put it out of His mind; He remembers it no more,” (Ibid, p. 65).

God is no tyrant. He will not hold our sins against us. So, if God doesn’t bring our sins to His mind again, then we shouldn’t continually bring them to our mind again and

fall prey to excessive sorrow and morbid self-incrimination. Since Jesus bore them fully and perfectly we don't have to!

There is a second way John shows us how Jesus takes away our sin. Look at the second half of v. 5. John writes, "...and in Him there is no sin."

2. JESUS LIVED FOR US AS OUR SUBSTITUTE TO TAKE AWAY OUR SINS. V. 5B

I take this phrase to refer to the perfection of Jesus' humanity. All that Christ did not only in His death but also in His life He did in our place as our substitute in order to take away our sins. In the Incarnation, we not only see God's opposition to sin in the purpose of Christ's coming. We also see God's opposition to sin in the nature of Christ's being.

The sinlessness of Jesus is the consistent witness of the NT writers. In 1 John 2:1, 29; 3:7. John describes Jesus as "righteous." In 1 John 3:3, John describes Jesus as "pure." In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul writes, "For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." In 1 Peter 1:19, Peter describes Jesus as a "lamb without blemish or spot." In 1 Peter 2:22, Peter writes, "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth." The point John is making is this: In order to "take away our sins" Jesus had to be the perfect offering for our sins.

Q. 16 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, "16. "Why must He be a true and righteous man?" Here's the answer: "He must be a true man because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin. He must be a righteous man because one who himself is a sinner cannot pay for others." "Sins," (ἁμαρτίας) according to John, is law breaking. In v. 4, John writes, "Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness." God the Son assumed human nature in order to take away/remove our acts of law breaking, which renders us guilty before God.

He appeared not just to die for us but also to live for us. In Galatians 4:4-5a, Paul writes, "⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law..." Why was Jesus born under the law? He "appeared" to fulfill the obligation that Adam and Israel failed to fulfill. He "appeared" to fulfill our obligation—the "should, ought and must" that tyrannizes our consciences. He "appeared" to fulfill all righteousness for us (Matt. 3:15). He obeyed for us as our substitute in His life fulfilling righteousness on our behalf! By His death He bore in full the penalties of God's law, which stood against us (Col. 2:14). By His life, He fulfilled the precepts of God's law, which we have failed to do.

Jesus is the spotless Lamb (the lamb without a blemish, the sinless atoning sacrifice), who offered Himself, in life and death, to take away our sins. Jesus "appeared" in order to be for us the perfect Spirit-filled man. He accomplished the

saving work the Father had sent Him to do by the power of the Holy Spirit. Michael Horton writes,

Jesus was conceived by the Spirit, was filled with the Spirit, grew in wisdom and understanding by the Spirit, was led by the Spirit into the desert for His temptation and was there upheld by the Spirit, and spoke what He heard from the Father and as He was empowered by the Spirit. Jesus is therefore not only God turned toward God, but humanity turned toward God in the power of the Spirit," (*The Christian Faith*, p. 469).

Jesus lived and died perfectly for us fulfilling the covenant of works on our behalf so that we could be granted a covenant of grace! "God is pleased with Him," writes Michael Horton, "not simply because He is the eternal Son but because He is the true and faithful son of Adam, Abraham and David," (*The Christian Faith*, p. 461). As God, Jesus speaks the divine law and as man He is the one who answers its requirements with full and perfect obedience as our representative (*Ibid*, p. 458).

One final note. We must not limit Christ's suffering just to the cross. Jesus' suffering began when assumed Mary's genes (cf. *Ibid*, p. 472). Contrary to the popular Christmas carol, "no crying He makes," Jesus assumed full humanity! He subjected Himself to the same physical weaknesses and limitations that we experience. He was mocked and rejected by His own family (John 7:1-5). He was harassed, despised and rejected by His own people (Jn. 1:11) and the Jewish religious establishment (Jn. 19:15). Isaiah describes His life as One who was, "despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces; He was despised, and we esteemed him not," (Isa. 53:3). His obedient suffering reached its culmination on the cross as Paul writes in Philippians 2:8, "being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." All of this He did for us in order to take away our sins.

REFLECTION:

By His death on the cross Jesus has forever fully satisfied the penalty of God's law against us! Never again do we need to fear the justice and wrath of God because Jesus died to take away our sins (cf. Rom. 8:1). By His life, Jesus has fully satisfied precepts of God's law required of us. Now, through faith in Him, when God the Father looks at us, He sees you and me clothed in the perfect, sinless obedience of His Son!

If you are not a Christian, now is time to rest and receive in the God-Man who "appeared in order to take away sins..." Today, not tomorrow, is the day of salvation! Call upon Him while He is near! He has promised to save forever those who come to Him in faith. He has promised, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out." Do not be afraid. Jesus is no judge. He is not a tyrant. ¹⁰ Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy

that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord," (Lk. 2:10-11). Receive and rest in the God-Man who appeared in order to take away sins!

If you are a Christian, John shows us that there is no greater motivation for renouncing sin and practicing righteousness than this fundamental gospel truth, "...He appeared in order to take away sins, and in Him there is no sin." This is the gospel truth, John says, "we know." Yet how often we forget the simple yet life-changing truth that He came for sinners! The fact is, even as a believer, you are still going to sin. The question is are you going to sin boldly or in unbelief? Are you going to live with a continual inward/subjective focus? Are you going to become an intolerant tyrant to yourself living in morbid self-incrimination? Or, will you turn outward and look to Christ in faith receiving and resting in the gospel truth that Jesus appeared to take away your sins!

I want to leave you with Martin Luther's gospel advice to his friend Jerome Weller who, like Philip Melancthon, was afflicted and burdened by a melancholy spirit and continually falling prey to morbid self-incrimination. Luther writes,

We must put the whole law entirely out of our eyes and hearts,- we, I say, whom the devil thus assails and torments. Whenever the devil charges us with our sins and pronounces us guilty of death and hell, we ought to say to him: 'I admit that I deserve death and hell; what, then will happen to me? Why, you will be eternally damned! By no means; for I know One who has suffered and made satisfaction for me. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where He abides, there will I also abide,'" (Dau, *Luther Examined and Reexamined*, p. 91).

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