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Sermon Summary #23

What To Do When Your Conscience Feels Dirty Hebrews 9:1-14

I'll be the first to admit that on a number of occasions in our study of Hebrews I've wondered to myself: *What does this book have to do with life in 2014?* Its language seems so foreign and its images so distant and its symbolism so strange. We live in a world where a man has walked on the moon. We wake up each day to a life dominated by computer technology and threats of nuclear terrorism. And when we get sick we have antibiotics within arm's reach. All this talk of high priests and blood sacrifices and ceremonial defilement and some guy named Melchizedek makes me wonder whether it's really of practical benefit to study this book.

My guess is that some of you have asked yourselves the same question and, sadly, have responded by closing your Bible, setting it to the side, believing it to be irrelevant to life in this fast-paced, highly-mechanized, sin-saturated and secular world of ours. But others of you, and I hope it's most, know that God controls and directs history and in doing so providentially orchestrates earlier events in order to reveal himself and the truth about how we might be reconciled to him. You have come to know that these odd-sounding ancient rituals and symbols and religious activities were designed by God to prepare us for the coming of Jesus Christ and the eternal life that is to be found in him alone.

In order to make this point crystal clear, I want us to start at the end of our passage today. *The primary point I want you to take away from our time together this morning is found in vv. 13-14.* There we read:

“For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb. 9:13-14).

I based the title to my message on v. 14 and our author's reference to the ever-pressing and urgent need to have our consciences purified so that we might love and serve and live for God and his glory. My title, then, is: “What To Do When Your Conscience Feels Dirty.”

So, what do you do when your conscience feels dirty?

You know what your *conscience* is. It's that spiritual dimension of the image of God indelibly imprinted on our souls by which we feel guilt and conviction when we do wrong and joy and comfort when we do right. It is that facet or function of our souls by which our moral deeds, be they good or evil, are subjectively registered within. Everyone has a conscience, even non-Christians who have not yet been born again by the Spirit.

And everyone here today knows exactly what I'm talking about when I refer to those occasions when your conscience feels dirty.

I'm talking about what you feel and sense deep within as you lie on your bed at night and reflect back on the events of the day: the harsh words you spoke to your kids, the lie that you told your boss hoping to gain advancement; the pride you felt in your heart when someone praised your efforts.

I'm talking about what you feel and sense deep within when you wake up in the morning and lustful thoughts and sinful fantasies race through your mind.

I'm talking about what you feel and sense deep within when you navigate your way through the day without giving God so much as an afterthought.

I'm talking about what you feel and sense deep within when you passed over in silence that incredible opportunity to share your faith and explain the gospel to a friend or co-worker or neighbor.

I'm talking about what you feel and sense deep within when you reflect on your life as a whole and all you see is one failure after another, one shattered dream after another, one devastating relationship after another, one sin after another.

I'm talking about what you feel and sense deep within when you consider how infinitely holy and pure and righteous God is and how immeasurably unholy and impure and unrighteous you are.

I'm talking about what you feel and sense deep within as you try to figure out what you can do to bridge the gap between you and God; what you can say or promise or make up for so that God will love you and accept you.

I'm talking about what happens in your heart when you finally realize that not all the good works in the world or charitable gifts to the United Way or days spent serving in the soup kitchen at your city's rescue mission will enable you to measure up.

Now here's what's remarkable. As different as our world is today from the world of the Old Testament when this tabernacle still stood, ***the most fundamental problem of the human heart is the same***. The most basic need of the human heart remains unchanged. In spite of our technological advances and the internet and our breaking of the genetic code and the existence of automobiles and deodorant and indoor plumbing, the most basic and fundamental and pressing need of your heart and of mine is no different from what it was for those Israelites who lived during the OT when the tabernacle and later the temple were standing and in full operation.

And what is that problem? A dirty conscience. A defiled spirit. A stained soul. A heart that feels wicked and wayward and for all its efforts can't seem to make its way back to God.

Isn't it fascinating that even after you spend an evening with your family parked in front of the TV or staring at your computer or drowning your pain in alcohol or reading a book or checking the results of movement in the stock market you are still wrestling with one core struggle and seeking an answer to one essential question:

How can I come to God and be received by him and reconciled to him when I feel so dirty? How can I be at peace with God when my conscience incessantly stabs at me with reminders of sin and lust and greed and ambition and selfishness and idolatry?

What we are reading in Hebrews 9 is the only answer, the only solution to that problem. The only thing that will purify your conscience so that you can enjoy God and know that he enjoys you is "the blood of Christ" (v. 14).

And that is precisely what the tabernacle and all its furniture and each action performed by the high priest within it are designed to teach us. So let's take a moment and look closely at what our author is describing in vv. 1-10. Instead of walking you through these verses I've chosen today to lead you on a guided tour of the tabernacle. . . .

A Tour of the Tabernacle

The Tabernacle was, for lack of a better way of putting it, ***a portable temple with a movable courtyard***. The ***courtyard*** itself was approximately 150 feet long and 75 feet wide. Here is a way of gaining a sense for its size: our auditorium is approximately 120 feet long and 90 feet wide. So, the courtyard was only 30 feet longer and 15 feet narrower than where you and I now sit.

The ***fence*** surrounding the courtyard was about 7½ feet high. After you entered the courtyard the first object you would encounter was ***the bronze altar or the altar of burnt offering*** (Exod. 27:1-8; 38:1-7). It was a hollow wooden box about 7½ feet long and 4½ feet high and was overlaid with bronze. A few steps farther in would bring you to a stand on which was a ***bronze basin*** filled with water where ceremonial washings would occur (Exod. 30:17-21; 38:8).

Beyond the bronze basin was the actual tabernacle itself. It was 45 feet long, 15 feet wide, and 15 feet high. It was made of wood but was overlaid with gold. The entire structure was covered by four layers of cloth and skin (Exod. 26:1-14).

Inside this tabernacle was what our author refers to in Hebrews 9:2 as “the first section” or “the Holy Place.” *The Holy Place* was 30 feet long, 15 feet wide, and 15 feet high. In it were three items.

First, there was *a golden lampstand* which provided light for the activities that took place within (Exod. 25:31-40; 37:17-24). Remember that *there were no windows in the tabernacle*. The lampstand had 3 branches springing up from either side of the main stem. The 6 branches and the main stem supported a flower shaped lamp holder (thus there were 7 stems total). Designated priests would enter both morning and evening to trim the lampstand so that its lights might be kept burning day and night. Most believe that the seven branches and lamps symbolized the fullness of light that is in Jesus Christ who is himself the light of the world.

Second, there was a *table* on which was placed what is called “*the bread of the Presence*” (Exod. 25:23-30). The table was also overlaid with gold and was about 3 feet long, 18 inches across and 27 inches high. The bread consisted of 12 loaves that were placed fresh on the table every Sabbath (Lev. 24:5-8). At the end of each week the old bread would be eaten by the priests because it was considered holy. Could this bread have been symbolic of Christ as “the bread of life”? Possibly. There were also a number of *accessories* on the table such as gold plates to hold the bread, gold dishes for frankincense, gold vessels for wine, and a number of spoons and bowls, all of which were made of gold.

The third item in the Holy Place was *the golden altar of incense* (Exod. 30:1-10; 37:25-29). Some translations make it sound as if this altar was actually behind the curtain and in the Most Holy Place, but the ESV rightly describes the Most Holy Place as “*having*” the golden altar of incense. Thus the likelihood is that he is speaking theologically and not spatially. In other words, the altar of incense was closely associated with the sacrifices made on the Day of Atonement that took place inside the veil of the Most Holy Place.

It was into this Holy Place that any of the priests of the tribe of Levi might enter and perform these duties. You may recall from Luke 1 that a priest named *Zacharias* was actually serving in the Holy Place at the altar of incense when an angel appeared to him and announced that his wife, Elizabeth, would conceive and give birth. Their child, of course, was John the Baptist.

The Most Holy Place or the *Holy of Holies* was an even smaller compartment, a perfect cube, 15x15x15 feet. Again, the platform on which I’m standing is exactly 15 feet across. It was separated from the Holy Place by a thick curtain or *veil* made of embroidered line with blue, purple, and scarlet coloring. Sewn into it with golden threads were pictures of the cherubim. It was supported by pillars of acacia wood overlaid with gold. This is the veil that was torn from top to bottom when Jesus was crucified.

The Holy of Holies contained *the Ark of the Covenant* which was itself was only 45 inches long and 27 inches in both width and height. It was covered with gold and in it you would find a *golden urn* that contained some manna that had fallen from heaven to feed the Israelites during their wandering in the wilderness. It also held *Aaron’s rod* and the *tablets of stone* on which had been inscribed the 10 Commandments.

A slab of pure gold, called *the mercy seat*, fit perfectly on top of the ark and hovering over it, facing each other, were *golden figures of the cherubim* (a special class of angelic being). They were called the “cherubim of glory” not because they were themselves glorious or beautiful but because it was between them that the “glory” of God’s presence appeared. God said of the Ark in Exodus 25:22a, “There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you.”

In order to transport the ark from place to place there were *4 golden rings at each corner* through which two rods made of acacia wood overlaid with gold were inserted. Many believe that acacia wood was symbolic of the humanity of Jesus since it was the sort of wood that never rotted. The gold, of course, was symbolic of his deity.

Only the High Priest of Israel could enter the Holy of Holies, and he could do this only once a year on the Day of Atonement. We read of this in Hebrews 9:6-10. When you have time, go to Leviticus 16 and read about this day and the activities that occurred on it.

What I want you to see is our author's statement in v. 9 – "According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that **cannot perfect the conscience** of the worshiper." All that such offerings and sacrifices could do was to cleanse the person outwardly so that they could join in with the rest of God's people in worship and prayer. These offerings and sacrifices only cleansed their bodies, removing ceremonial defilement and qualifying them for life in the community of God's people.

But their consciences were never fully and finally and forever cleansed of the defiling power of guilt that was the result of sin.

Here in v. 9 he also says that this way of relating to God through animal sacrifices in an earthly tabernacle was *symbolic of the present time*, by which he means the Old Covenant age. His point is that he himself is living in a time of transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. With the coming of Christ the old way of relating to God has been replaced. We have entered into what he calls in v. 10 "the time of reformation." The person and work of Jesus Christ have supplanted and replaced the entire ritual sacrificial system of the Old Covenant.

So, what did the tabernacle and its furniture and the activities that took place within the courtyard mean? What did it symbolize? What are we supposed to learn from it all? Let me mention three things.

First, the exquisite construction of the tabernacle and the aesthetic perfection of its furnishings and the intricate design sewn into the embroidered material, together with the veil and the gold and the variety of colors throughout were all designed to serve as **a visual sermon declaring the beauty of God**. Everything in the tabernacle and later in the Temple pointed to the glory and grandeur and splendor of God.

But it was especially to his **holiness** that all this pointed. The necessity for continual washings and cleansing of everyone and everything that entered the tabernacle was a constant reminder that God's holiness is of such a nature that only the perfect and pure are acceptable to him.

Second, the tabernacle and everything in it was a daily reminder not just of God's holiness but of **man's sinfulness**. **Everything there shouted out loud: Stay away! Do not draw near! If you come near to God, you die!** That is why access to God's presence was restricted to only one man, the High Priest, on one day of the year, and only then if he brought to the altar a sacrifice of blood both for himself and the people.

Third, and certainly most important of all, **the tabernacle and everything in it pointed to the coming of the person and work of Jesus Christ**. May I remind you that when John the apostle described the incarnation of the Son of God, the entrance into human flesh and into the life of this world of the Second Person of the Trinity, he said in John 1:14 – "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." And the word translated "dwelt" is more literally, "tabernacled" (if I may be allowed to turn a noun into a verb)! **The mercy and grace and forgiveness and glory and beauty that the tabernacle embodied has now come to us fully and finally in the person of Jesus!**

Glorious Contrasts

The point of vv. 11-14 is to draw our attention to four wonderful contrasts.

- (1) Over against the earthly and temporary tabernacle of the Old Covenant, one made with human hands, the Lord Jesus Christ ministers on our behalf in the greater and more perfect tabernacle, namely, the immediate and unqualified presence of God.
- (2) Over against the Old Covenant High Priest who had to enter in with a blood sacrifice year after year, Jesus offered up the sacrifice of himself "once for all" (v. 12).

(3) Over against the ineffective animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant ritual system, Jesus Christ has offered up on the cross his own precious blood and thereby obtained not merely annual redemption but “eternal” redemption!

(4) Over against the blood of bulls and goats that could only provide external ceremonial cleansing, the blood of our Savior cleanses our consciences and brings us the final and full forgiveness of sins.

And from what is our conscience purified or cleansed? “Dead works” (v. 14b). He has in mind everything we have ever done thinking that it would redeem our souls; everything we’ve ever said hoping that our words would turn away God’s wrath; everything we ever gave or sacrificed or promised or turned away from thinking that it would put our conscience and heart and mind at rest. They are “**dead**” because they have no power to reconcile us to God. They are “**dead**” because they come from hearts that are devoid of spiritual life. They are “**dead**” because they leave us feeling hopeless that anything could ever set us free from the condemning power of sin and guilt.

And it is only from a pure conscience, one made right and clean by the blood of Christ, that we can then serve God and love him and glorify him in the way that he originally designed when he created us.

Do you want another word in place of “dead works”? I’ll give you one: **Religion**! Religion is the attempt to motivate people to do “good works” on the basis of their *feelings* of guilt. The gospel calls people to “good works” on the basis of the *forgiveness* of guilt!

Religion says: “You’re obviously feeling guilty and dirty and defiled. So here’s what you need to do: go to work for God! Give more. Pray more. Serve more.”

The Gospel says: “The problem isn’t that you ‘feel’ guilty. The problem is that you ‘are’ guilty! So here’s what you need to do: receive by faith the work God in Christ has already done for you!”

Are you still paralyzed by a dirty conscience? Does that feeling of moral stain on your soul leave you in despair and hopelessness? There is only one solution; only one thing that can cleanse and make you whole: the blood of Jesus Christ shed at the cross for sinners like you and me.

Charles Simeon was born in 1759 and died in 1836. He remembered well his conversion to Christ. It happened as he read about what happened on the Day of Atonement when the High Priest laid his hands on the scapegoat, symbolizing the transfer of guilt from the people of Israel to the sacrificial offering.

“The thought came into my mind,” said Simeon, “‘What, may I transfer all my guilt to another? Has God provided an Offering for me, that I may lay my sins on his head?’ Then, God willing, I will not bear them on my soul one moment longer. Accordingly I sought to lay my sins upon the sacred head of Jesus” (cited by F. F. Bruce, 194).

You can do the same today and forever be cleansed and set free from a dirty conscience.