

A Better Sacrifice

Hebrews 10:1-18

When my parents were married nearly 50 years ago, like a lot of couples starting out, they had virtually nothing. So for their first Christmas (just a month after their wedding), their only gift to each other was to buy a board game to play together—the game of Monopoly. And as a kid I remember playing with that very Monopoly set (I think they still have it). Sometimes playing the actual game Monopoly, but a lot of times just playing with the paper money. That stuff was fun. It felt cool to pretend like you had cash. But if you were to walk into the local grocery store, grab a Snickers bar, and throw down some of that orange and pink dough, you'd get some interesting looks. Maybe a chuckle, or a sympathetic 'Aw, isn't that cute?' What you *wouldn't* get is a Snickers bar. Because even if you have the right amount of money, it's not the right *kind* of money. It's the wrong currency, and so therefore you can't make the payment.

In our relationship with God, as humans made in his image, for his glory, and yet separated from him by our sin and guilty of high treason against his throne, there is a payment that every human being owes. A debt to God as a result of our sin. But so often we come to God with Monopoly money—with our good deeds, or our religious works, or our social justice advocacy—as though if we can just come up with enough, that's somehow going to make up for our sin and pay the debt. Similar to those who were trying convince the Hebrews that the sacrifices of the old covenant were enough to pay their debt.

But even if we could come up with the right amount (which we can't, because our debt is too big), what we offer to God is the wrong currency; the wrong kind of offering. Because what we're going to see in our passage this morning is that there's only one acceptable currency that's truly able to pay the debt of sin—only one sacrifice that's enough to perfect all God's people for all time for an abiding relationship with him. And that is the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus.

Our passage makes that case in two movements, two sections. First in vv. 1-4, we see the insufficiency of sacrifices under the old covenant—how offering sacrifices under the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai is a never-ending job, with an unhappy result, because it trades in the wrong kind of currency. Then in vv. 5-18, we see the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice of himself in a new covenant—how his sacrifice deals in the right currency, such that he has finished the job, with the happiest of results.

We'll start with the insufficiency of the old covenant in vv. 1-4.

The Insufficiency of Old Covenant Sacrifices (10:1-4)

When I was young I had a friend whose job was mowing the local cemetery. And it was a pretty big cemetery for a small town, about 40 acres. It took him so many days to mow the whole thing, that as soon as he finished, it was already time to start over. It was literally a never-ending job.

So it was with the sacrifices made under the old covenant. If you've been with us through this series, or have spent time in Hebrews or some of the Old Testament books like Exodus or Leviticus, you'll remember how as part of his deal with ancient Israel—that he would be their God and they would be his people—God gave them a priesthood and a system of sacrifices, to make it possible for a holy God to dwell among a sinful people. And as we talked about a couple of weeks ago, sin affects God and his people in several different ways, and so there were a variety of sacrifices to deal with the effects of sin.

Sometimes sin puts us in debt to others. Our wrongdoing doesn't just dishonor God but hurts or defrauds others around us. And so some of the sacrifices involved restitution, repaying the wrong (cf. Lev. 5:14-6:7).

Sin also pollutes both God's people and his place, making them unclean and unfit for God's presence. We talked about that a couple weeks ago. And so some sacrifices dealt with the dirtiness problem—they were designed for purification (cf. Lev. 4:1-5:13).

But the most fundamental effect of sin is that it stirs up God's holy anger, because it robs him of what's rightfully his. We were made for his honor and glory; he alone deserves our glory and worship. But when we sin and reject him and his rule, we're robbing God by depriving him of his rightful glory. That's treason against God and his kingdom, and it makes God angry. Just as you would be angry if someone were to walk into your house and say, 'You know what, this house belongs to me now. I make the rules; I'm in charge. You need to get out.' You'd be furious if someone did that to you, and rightfully so. That's what we do to God through our sin. It's our attempt to steal his throne and kick him out of his own kingdom. It makes him righteously angry, and puts us in his eternal debt—a debt payable only by death (cf. Gen. 2:16-17; Rom. 6:23).

And so some sacrifices were designed to deal with this most fundamental problem of God's righteous anger, in order to bring forgiveness for sin—to cancel the debt. The whole offering or burnt offering: the animal being sacrificed is consumed entirely, as it bears God's wrath against Israel's sin in their place, "to make atonement for [them]" (Lev. 1:4; cf. vv. 1-17).

So God gave Israel a priesthood and a system of sacrifices so that they could have relationship with him despite their sin. And the forgiveness accomplished through that system was real. The problem was that Israel kept on sinning. No sooner did the priests finish offering a sacrifice than another one was needed. It was a never-ending job. Like getting a government contract to redo the intersection at Hwy. 27 and Rte. 30; talk about job security. Or to repair the Marian St. Bridge in Natick—it's open now, but it's still under construction, and has been for the last 18+ years. The Levitical priests were never done offering sacrifices.

This is because, according to v. 1, the law they operate under—the old covenant—"has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities." As we've argued throughout this book, the old covenant was always meant to be temporary; it was designed to point forward to Jesus. He's the reality. Now a shadow corresponds to reality. If you look at a shadow on the ground, you can learn something of the object that casts it—it's shape and size. But that picture is pretty unclear. It's two-dimensional—flat. There's no color, no definition. And it can be easily distorted, depending on our perspective.

Sacrifices under the law brought real forgiveness, but because they operated in the shadow of the law instead of the reality of Christ, their true purpose was easily distorted, and they were incapable of finishing the job. Continuing in v. 1, the law “can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sin?” (10:1-2).

So offering sacrifices for sin under the old covenant was a never-ending job. And because it was never-ending, it had a rather unhappy result. Verse 3: “But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin every year.” If you have student loans or credit card bills or a mortgage—any kind of debt—your lender sends you a monthly statement in the mail (or email) to document your recent payments. And when you look at that statement you can see that you just made a payment. But how does that statement really affect you? It’s a whopping reminder of how huge your debt is; of how much farther you still have to go. It’s not encouraging; it’s overwhelming and depressing.

Such was the effect of Israel’s regular sacrifices. Yes the forgiveness was real, but the ongoing necessity of sacrifice after sacrifice, rather than encouraging them in their forgiveness, simply reminded them that they still had a major problem that they were ultimately incapable of dealing with. A debt they could never repay, because their sacrifices were never enough. It was an unhappy result—not of confidence or freedom but guilt and anxiety.

And all of this owes ultimately to the fact that sacrifices under the old covenant traded in the wrong currency. Just as Monopoly money can’t buy a Snickers bar or pay down your debt, so “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (v. 4). It worked temporarily and incompletely under the shadow. But if our sin is to be dealt with completely, if our debt to God is to be paid in full—such that the people of God are “perfected”—completely absolved of our guilt and sin, with confidence that there is therefore now no condemnation for us, because the debt has been paid in full—we need a different kind of sacrifice. The full amount in a different currency. And that’s something the old covenant law can’t give us. And it’s something that our modern imitations of the law can’t match.

The problem of sin is not unique to ancient Israel; it’s the plight of all humanity at all times in all places. The Bible tells us that “just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, . . . so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12). And just as the blood of bulls and goats can’t take away ancient Israel’s sins, neither can recycling, or protesting, or mowing your neighbor’s lawn, or reading your Bible, or going to church, or teaching Sunday School, or singing in the choir, or preaching, or anything else we might be tempted to say, ‘Look at what I did for you God; now are we good?’—none of these can take away sins. They’re all good things, but they’re not enough, and they’re the wrong currency.

So what is enough, and what is the right currency? Something only the sacrifice of Jesus can accomplish. And that’s what we see in vv. 5-18.

The Sufficiency of Christ’s Once-for-All Sacrifice (10:5-18)

To make his case, the author starts by doing what he has done in every chapter so far—taking us back to the Old Testament. In vv. 5-7 he quotes Psalm 40:6-8, and then in vv. 8-10 he shows us

how Christ fulfills that psalm because his offering is enough—it's the right amount—and he makes it using the only acceptable currency—his own body.

First, the quantity—the right amount. Psalm 40:6-8 reads:

Sacrifice and offering you have not desired, but you have given me an open ear [or literally, 'ears you have dug for me']. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. ⁷ Then I said, "Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: ⁸I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."

In Psalm 40, the psalmist David comes to realize something about God's law: that while God himself prescribed the sacrifices and offerings, it was never about just going through the motions. The sacrifices themselves were irrelevant if your *heart* wasn't in the right place (cf. 1 Sam. 15:22-23; Hos. 6:6). What God ultimately wants is not the blood of bulls and goats, but *obedience* that comes from ears open to the Lord's voice, a real desire to do his will, and a heart filled with his law—not the external obedience common to the old covenant, but an obedience consistent with the promises of the new covenant that God will write on people's hearts (Ps. 40:8; cf. Jer. 31:31-34).

This is what Jesus offers in his life, death, and resurrection—he not only perfectly obeys every command of God's law, he does it from the heart. Jesus pays the *right amount*. Hebrews 10:8: "When he said above, 'You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings' (these are offered according to the law), then he added, 'Behold, I have come *to do your will*'" (10:8-9). No Israelite was able to do God's will from the heart, to offer the obedience he desired. No human can ever do it; we're all stained by sin. But Jesus, in paying the right amount, not only fulfills the old covenant, he sets it aside, and replaces it with something better. "He abolishes the first in order to establish the second" (10:9). Jesus alone has the cash to pay our debt—a life of perfect obedience from the heart.

But it's not enough to have the right amount of money; it has to be an acceptable currency. If you try to pay for your gasoline with Rupees or Euros down at the Shell, it's not going to work—even if you have enough Rupees or Euros. And there is only one currency truly qualified to remove sin from humanity, only one kind of substitute that can truly stand in our place and represent us—the blood of bulls and goats won't do. It has to be a *fellow human*, someone like us in every way, but without sin (cf. Heb. 2:17; 4:15). And so Jesus makes his payment using the *right currency*—his own body. Verse 10: "And by that will we have been sanctified [made holy] through the offering of *the body* of Jesus Christ once for all."

And this too is anchored in Psalm 40, though it's a little harder to see. You may have noticed when I read it earlier, that when Hebrews quotes Psalm 40:6, it puts it a little differently. Psalm 40:6 says, "ears you have dug for me," while Hebrews 10:5 translates that, "a body you have prepared for me." And it first, it's kind of like, 'did the author of Hebrews get it wrong? Did he mistranslate it or just change it to fit his purposes?' Some scholars will say that.

But the author of Hebrews is simply taking the imagery of Psalm 40 and applying it at a broader level. The imagery of giving the psalmist an open ear, or more literally, *digging ears* for someone—it's the picture of *God forming man from clay*. If you've ever made a person out of Play-Doh, how do you make their nostrils, or how do you make their ears? You stick your finger

in there and dig it out. Psalm 40 picks up the imagery of creation from Genesis 2, where “God formed man of dust from the ground” (Gen. 2:7) and uses that to describe how God prepares his servant to be faithful to his covenant from the heart—he digs for him ears to hear. God did the *same thing* for Jesus at a *broader and more comprehensive* level—he formed for him an entire human body. A body just like Adam’s and ours, so that Christ could make his payment in the right currency. Earlier in Hebrews the author puts it this way: “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things . . . he had to be made like his brothers [and sisters] in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:14, 17).

Jesus made his payment in the full amount with the right currency—his body for ours. And because he has done this, his saving work as our substitute is done. *Finished*. That’s the point of vv. 11-14:

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. (10:11-13)

When we were between churches, before we moved out here back in 2011, I worked in the shipping and packing department of a warehouse. And several times a day, the manager would come by to check on things or give us a new task. And when he came by, you didn’t want to be caught sitting down. Not because he was mean, but because unless it’s break time, or 5:00, your work’s not done. There’s no coffee time; no sitting down on the job. Coffee is for closers.

In the same way, the Levitical priests were never able to sit down, because their job was never finished. No coffee for them. In contrast, Jesus made *one sacrifice*, and then *sat down* because his saving work was truly done. His life and his body were enough to pay the debt of all humanity at all times in all places through a *single* offering—such is the infinite value of Christ and infinite love of the Father. As v. 14 puts it, “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”

Now notice the ‘already’ and ‘not-yet’ in that verse. We are still being sanctified—made holy, transformed to become more and more like Christ. It’s not that the Christian never sins anymore. We do sin, but we’re growing, we’re repenting, we’re being changed. At the same time, we are already perfected. Through our union with Christ, by faith, our justification is already complete (cf. Rom. 3:21-26; 8:1). Our status before God is ‘righteous’ and ‘accepted.’ Our sin no longer counts against us on God’s scales, because it has been paid in full.

To go back to the financial illustration, sacrifices under the old covenant were like paying the minimum balance on a credit card you still use every day. It was enough so that Israel could keep using the card, but it didn’t make any progress paying down the debt. In fact, the debt of sin kept growing. In contrast, Jesus paid the balance in full with one offering, then cuts up the card throwing the record away, and then adds our name to his infinite bank account. He takes the blame for our sin, and gives us the credit for his righteousness. That’s a pretty good deal. That’s what we call grace. 2 Corinthians 5:21 describes it like this: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” It’s the great

exchange—he takes our sin, and gives us his righteousness, such that we are perfected before God, even while we’re still being changed.

And because our debt is paid in full, and Jesus’ saving work is completely done, his work produces the happiest of results for his people: *full forgiveness*. Verse 15:

And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, ¹⁶ "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds," ¹⁷ then he adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." ¹⁸ Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. (10:15-18)

Just a side note: notice how he quotes Jeremiah 31 here and says “and the Holy Spirit . . . says”? A nice reminder of where Scripture ultimately comes from—it’s not just the words of men but the Word of God.

But what is his point? He quotes Jeremiah 31 again, just as he did back in c. 8, and emphasizes the ultimate result of the new covenant in Christ: *lasting forgiveness*. Through the finished work of Christ God will remember our sins and lawless deeds no more. Not just the sins of our past, but of our present and our future. No more sacrifices. Nothing we need to add to Christ’s work in order to be accepted by God. It is finished, paid in full. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). We are *forgiven*. This is the happiest of results. The single sacrifice of Christ in history was enough to perfect all God’s people for all time for an abiding relationship with God.

So the question remains for us this morning, to what extent does this glorious truth shape my life?

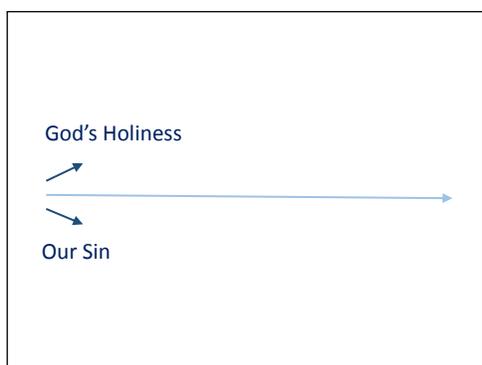
If you’re not a Christian—maybe you’re just checking things out, or you’re here because you feel like you have to be, or maybe you’ve been coming to church for years but never met Christ personally, there are two questions I encourage you to think about this morning. First, *do you realize your debt*? That all of us really have fallen short of God’s glory? Sometimes we don’t think we need Christ because we don’t think we’re that bad (or at least not as bad as that guy over there). But we’ve all messed up. We’ve all sinned against God and incurred upon ourselves a debt that we can never repay. A debt that, without Christ, we will pay for through an eternity in hell. Do you realize your debt—that this is serious? And second, *do realize the incomparable extent of God’s love for you*—despite that debt? A love that didn’t wait for us to clean our lives up, or come up with a way to pay God back, but sent his Son to pay our debt for us. Romans 5:8 tells us that “God shows his love for us in that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us.” Do you realize his love for you—a love he displayed in the cross? Do you know he is offering that love and forgiveness to you *right now* through faith in his Son? Not what we can do for God, but trusting what God has done for us through Christ. Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24).

If you’re a Christian—if you have repented of your sin and placed your faith in Christ as your only hope, your only King and Savior—there’s just one question I want to encourage you to think about in light of our passage this morning: *Are you living as someone whose debt has been*

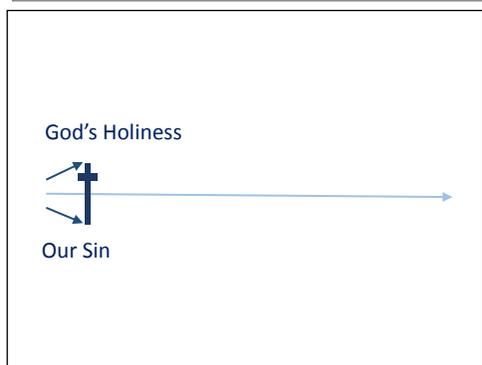
paid in full? Or are you still trying to pay for it yourself, to chip in here or there? Or feeling guilty or insecure because you're not?

Another way to put it: Is the gospel you believed when you became a Christian still enough for you to live as a Christian? Are you living as someone whose debt has been paid in full?

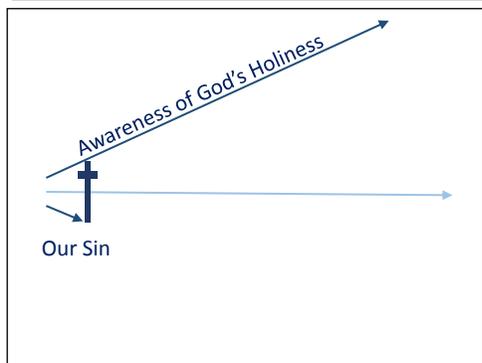
There's a really helpful illustration that many of you have seen before (and now I know who to credit it to—this was crafted by Paul Miller, whom I met recently).



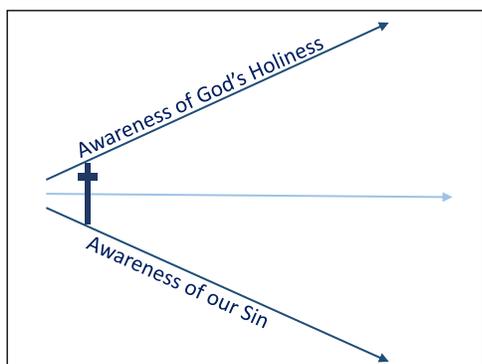
When someone becomes a Christian, you realize that there is a huge gap between God in his holiness and us in our sin. You realize your debt.



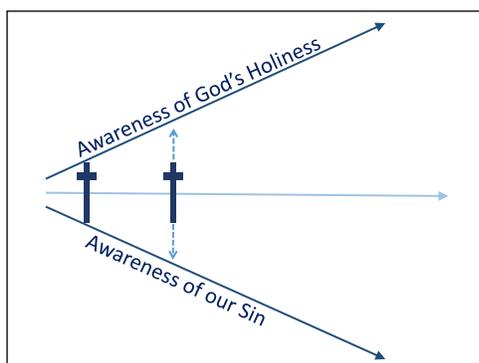
But you also realize God's love for you in paying that debt, and how it's the cross that bridges the gap.



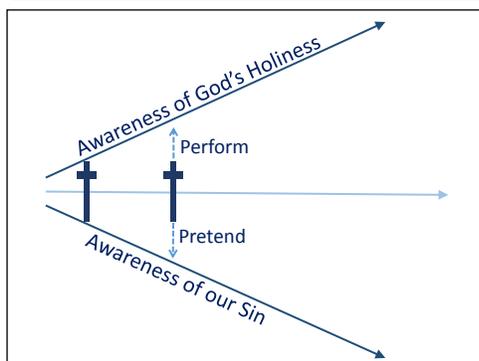
But what's interesting, is that as you grow as a Christian, your awareness of God's holiness grows too. You see more and more how beautiful and majestic and perfect and awesome is God.



Which has this funny side effect [4] of increasing our awareness not only of God's holiness, but of the depths of our sin. The more clearly we see God, the more deeply we realize how far we've fallen short.



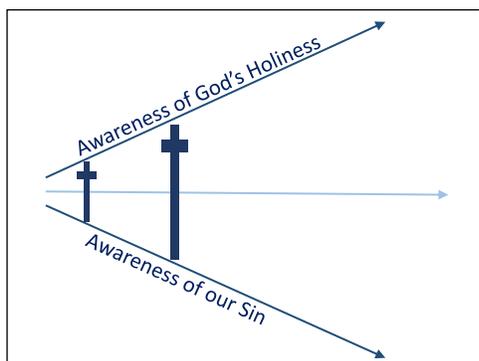
And what happens is that, if the cross is just about beginning a relationship with God, but not growing in relationship with God—if our debt isn't really paid in full for all time—then after a while that gap comes back, and we've got to find a way to fill it.



And we usually do that in one of two ways: either *pretending* that we're not as sinful as we really are, or by *performing* for God, as though to make it up to him—to chip in a little bit on our debt.

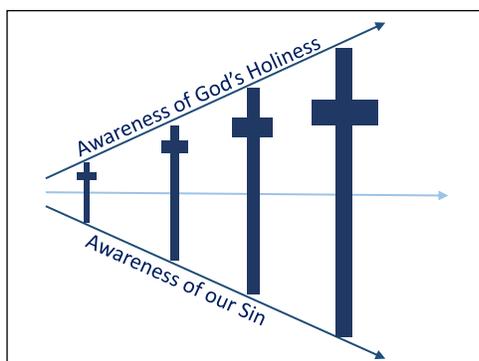
And this is where so many Christians live—trapped in this cycle between pretending and performing. Between shame and arrogance. Hiding who we are, and projecting an image of someone better than who we are.

But what if the single sacrifice of Christ was enough to perfect *all God's people* for *all time* for an *abiding* relationship with God?



What if the cross doesn't just pay the cover charge to get us in the door, but completely covers us for all eternity?

Christian: are you living as someone whose debt has been paid in full?



Are you depending on the finished work of Christ for your entire relationship with God, beginning to end? Such that as your awareness of God's holiness continues to grow, and along with it your awareness of sin, that the cross is enough each step of the way?

There is *still* therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And there never will be. Rather, there is peace. There is joy. There is freedom from guilt and shame. There is confidence to enter God's presence with a true heart in full assurance of faith. If you're deeply in debt to the bank, there's no comfortable way to walk in there. Because you know someone's

going to pull up your account and see how much owe; it's just shame and guilt. But if your account is overflowing, that changes the way you walk into the bank. You walk into there with confidence. That's how we're invited to approach God—with confidence that in Christ our account is overflowing. Not swagger, as though we've done anything. But humility and joy at God's gift. A confidence, humility, and joy that well up in *willing obedience* to God—not because we have to, but because we *want* to. Not in order to add to or replace Christ's sacrifice, but because his sacrifice is enough. Because God is that worthy; his grace is that amazing.

Are you living as someone whose debt has been paid in full? I hope so. There's no better way to live.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Questions for Study and Understanding

1. In terms of context, what has the author talked about in previous passages that help us understand what he's talking about now?
2. What does the author seem to be emphasizing in these verses (for clues, look at things like structure, repetition, etc.)?
3. According to vv. 1-4, what are the reasons that sacrifices under the old covenant are insufficient to take away sins?
4. According to vv. 5-18, how is it that Jesus' sacrifice is able to do what the Levitical priests' sacrifices couldn't? What basis or evidence does the author give for this?

Questions for Reflection and Application

5. How would you describe the practical difference between living under the debt of sin, versus living as though your debt has been paid in full?
6. What keeps you from living as though your debt of sin is fully paid?
7. What helps you live as though your debt has been paid in full? How do you keep the gospel fresh in your life such that it truly impacts the confidence of your relationship with God?