

## *Neighbor, Savior, Lord*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on September 12, 2021.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Romans 5:6–11).<sup>1</sup>

Jesus summarized the Decalogue simply: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And... You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-39). It is a brilliant, comprehensive yet succinct understanding of God’s Moral Law. It is also clear in its inclusion: God, my neighbor, and me. Of course, only the fool questions who God is (Ps. 14:1), and I know who I am, but who is my neighbor? Is my neighbor my friend but not my enemy? Is my neighbor my social or political tribe but not yours? Is my neighbor those I like but not those I dislike or those who dislike me? Who is my neighbor?

Jesus was asked the same question, wasn’t he? Do you remember how he replied? He did not quote the Golden Rule from his Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:12), although he could have. He did not quote the fifth through the tenth commandments, but he could have. Instead, he told a parable. Listen carefully:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back’ (Luke 10:30–35).

At the conclusion of this parable, Jesus asked, “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” (Luke 10:37). The answer is obvious, isn’t it? Only the most callous would miss it: It is the one “who showed him mercy” (Luke 10:37).

Who is your neighbor? To whom is God commanding you to show mercy? Is it someone who disagrees with your worldview? Is it someone who hates what you love or loves what you hate? Is it someone who you consider despicable, unworthy of your mercy? It’s easy to show mercy to those we love, to those with whom we agree, to those who share our worldview, yet in

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

considering Jesus' parable honestly, the truth is that we all fail to love our neighbor as we should.

Jesus didn't fail. He who came in mercy, showed mercy and revealed God's mercy, not merely with his kindness but his life: "[For rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person perhaps someone might possibly dare to die.] But God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:7-8 NET), "the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). He is our neighbor, Savior, and Lord, and in his death he satisfied the wrath of God.

### **Christ's Death Satisfies**

Like the man left half dead on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, Paul says that spiritually we were "weak," better translated as "helpless." Left alone, we would die not merely as the victim of robbers but an eternal death for our sin. But God, who is rich in mercy (Eph. 2:4), in his love sent his only Son (John 3:16), not merely to clean our wounds, carry our load, and care for our health but to die for our sin. He was fully invested in our best interest.

But comparing Jesus to the Good Samaritan has its limits. I may die for you in love, but what would my death accomplish? And even if it could accomplish something for you, could it accomplish something for others? Could my death accomplish something for people of other lands and languages? And what about those who came before me and will come after me? No, as noble and loving as my sacrificial death might be, it is limited in its efficacy and the time and space of my humanity. Christ's death was not.

He who died "at the right time" at the divinely-ordained place, died for the sins of the elect, past, present, and future. The atoning efficacy of his death reaches back to the faith of our parents in Eden and forward to faith on the last day, and all who believe in between. As the sacrificial lamb of God, Christ's death satisfied the divine wrath of God. In Christ, God's wrath no longer remains upon us. We truly stand before God not in judgment but as justified.

Yet, how often do we wallow in our sin and misery as if self-inflicted "penance" could satisfy God's wrath? Forgetting or perhaps ignoring the satisfaction of Christ's death, do you find yourself reaching back into your past, drawing out the times you sinned, perhaps egregiously, shaming you into a weight of guilt? Are you living life as a Christian yet burdened by your past or fearful of your future? *Memorize* this: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). *Meditate* on this: "as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12). *Cling* to this: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

Look to the gospel of Jesus Christ and let Christ untie the burdens that weigh you down: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). Christ has satisfied *everything* God requires. Sin? Pardoned! Enmity? Slain!

Iniquity? Ended! Everlasting righteousness? Secured!<sup>2</sup> Rest in this: Because Christ's death satisfies, his blood justifies.

### **Christ's Blood Justifies**

Think with me again of Jesus' parable, and the mercy of a neighbor. The Good Samaritan's mercy extended beyond the immediate, didn't it? (It lasted longer than a 30-minute sermon). The Samaritan took the helpless man to a safe place, cared for him, and paid for his continued provision. The helpless man did nothing to encourage such mercy nor reciprocity for his kindness. It was an authentic, selfless act of kindness. It was also costly. The Good Samaritan's mercy cost him two denarii. God's mercy cost him the shed blood of his Son. But it is only by his precious blood that I am justified as righteous.

O precious is the flow  
that makes me white as snow;  
No other fount I know;  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

But, why his blood? In our modern, sterile culture, most of us are far removed from the slaughtering of animals. Many of our children don't know where our food comes from or how it makes its way through the modern food chain to the store. This may cause some to consider an allusion to blood out of place or even barbaric. Yet, the slaughter of animals dates back to Eden after the Fall and the sacrificing of animals runs throughout Old Testament Scripture as an integral part of worshiping the Lord, the one true God. Why? Why is blood such an important part of Old Testament worship?

The writer of Hebrews helpfully explains, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22). The sacrificed animal, of God's appointment, served as a substitute for the sinner. God's wrath was appeased for the sake of it. The blood from the sacrifice served as a substitutionary atonement for sin. Without it there was no forgiveness.

But the Old Testament sacrifices, like the tabernacle, the promised land, and the temple, were not an end in themselves but pointed to something greater to come. Christ's death upon the cross was not merely a Roman execution of torture and shame but also the God-ordained altar of substitutionary sacrifice, offered once for all (Rom. 6:10), fulfilling every sacrifice before and negating any sacrifice after. On the cross, Jesus' blood was shed, serving as a propitiation, or atoning sacrifice, for the sins of the elect (1 John 2:2). Therefore, Paul writes, "we have now been justified by his blood." Indeed, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). And more, in fact Paul says, "much more," because we are "justified by his blood," we are securely and eternally "saved by him from the wrath of God."

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible: Genesis to Revelation*, ed. Leslie F. Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), 1765.

<sup>3</sup> "Nothing but the Blood," in *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 307.

Jesus said, “whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36). The obedience Jesus refers to is the obedience of faith, a fact pertinent to every believer. Consider the practical implications of this reality in your daily life. For all who believe, we wake up every morning to a wrath-free life. We live each day free from condemnation and without worry of eternal judgment. We know our eternal destiny is secure and the challenges of the day are merely preparatory for the glory to come.

When trials or troubles or tribulations come our way, we don’t fear that they are God’s judgment upon us or a “mark” or a sign of disfavor. Why? Because every day of your existence in Christ is covered by his shed blood. Every sinful thought, iniquitous word, transgressing deed you may count is covered by the comprehensive, propitiatory, justifying blood of the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us. But it is not only his death that saves the helpless, like you and me, but also his resurrected life.

### **Christ’s Life Sanctifies**

So important is Jesus’ resurrection and life that Paul says that Christianity is a sham without it (1 Cor. 15:12-19). Why? Because just as Jesus lived, died, resurrected, and ascended, so all who believe are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. The testimony of *every* Christian does not vary from this: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). This truth defines our walk with Christ, dead to sin and alive to Christ.

From crucified with Christ and buried with him, “just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). It is a new life, one which is no longer at enmity with God but reconciled to him. It is a joyful life, a life lived not in the old self but in Christ.

Think about this: Paul said, “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21), which is hardly an embrace of premature death. Rather, Paul considered this earthly life, lived as a Christian, as defined in Christ. Nothing in life escapes this purview: “to live is Christ.” Nothing we think, say, or do is outside of the scope of Christ. The reality is that all who are in Christ are indwelt with the Spirit of Christ. Indeed, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5)—all who are in Christ.

And it is in Christ and through his Spirit that we love the Lord our God with heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbor as ourself. We love God and our neighbor, because God first loved us (1 John 4:19). And so, “we rejoice in God through whom we have now received reconciliation.” We are both recipients and conduits of love, loving not simply as the Good Samaritan but as Christ, who “loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph. 5:2), our neighbor, Savior, and Lord.