

## ZION, JANUARY 10, 2021

In a Charlie Brown cartoon Linus is looking very forlorn. He asks Lucy, "Why are you always so anxious to criticize me?" Lucy, looking very self-righteous, replies, "I just think I have a knack for seeing other people's faults." Linus becomes indignant. "What about your own faults?" he asks. She answers, "I have a knack for overlooking them."

Some people think they are Lucy. They overlook their own faults. They see your faults, inconsistencies, failures, mistakes and sins well enough. But somehow their own just seem to escape them.

Most of us know that doesn't work. Broken values and broken commandments can be buried for a time. But they have a way of always working their way up to the surface. God cannot- and does not- just overlook sin. He doesn't just turn a blind eye. He can't just ignore our failure to keep His commandments. Why? Because our God is a just God.

Justice demands payment. If that were the end of the story, we would all be lost but, thankfully, it isn't. Because our God is not only a just God, He is also a merciful one.

That's why Mark begins his gospel with the words, "**The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**" In Mark's gospel there's no story about the angel appearing to Mary and Joseph. There's no story of the birth of the Savior in Bethlehem. Mark gets right to the point. He tells us upfront that it has been God's grand design from the beginning of creation to come to the world Himself. To come and break the power of Satan by providing His own blood on the cross and His own resurrection from the grave.

No price would be too high to bring about our forgiveness and redemption. If you and I were God and we had to decide if we wanted to save sinful, disobedient mankind, we probably would say: "No." The price is too high. The cost is too great.

God our creator knew our world was saturated by sin, disobedience, broken ethics, and broken commandments. He saw that it was filled with wandering, wayward and runaway children. So, what did He do?

Moved by the depth of His character and love, moved by grace and mercy, He didn't say no. He didn't say the price is too high. No. Instead, He fulfilled the promise He had made to Adam and Eve way back in the Garden of Eden after their fall into sin. He came to the world He had created. He chose to be born in a Bethlehem manger. To take upon Himself a human form. Nothing was too high a price to grant forgiveness and eternal life for His beloved creation. For you and for me.

Mark quotes the prophet Isaiah, **Behold, I send my messenger...who will prepare the way for the coming Messiah, a voice of one crying in the wilderness. John appeared, calling for people to repent and receive baptism for the forgiveness of sins."**

Max Lucado writes of John, **"John is a child of the desert. Leathery face. Tanned skin. Clothing of animal skins. What he owned fit in a pouch. His walls were mountains and his ceiling the stars. His was a courageous voice of repentance. Unfortunately, not accepted by all."**

John invited people to step into the water and be baptized. Baptism is what separates the tire kickers from the car buyers. Would you feel comfortable marrying someone who wanted to keep the marriage a secret? Neither does God. It's one thing to say in the privacy of your own heart that you are a sinner in need of a Savior. But it's quite another to walk out of the shadow. To stand before family, friends and colleagues. To state publicly that you are a sinner and stand in need of Christ as your forgiver and Savior. That's what those who came out to see John did. They heard his call to repentance.

They confessed their sins. They were baptized in the river Jordan for the remission of those sins. But it all began by hearing the call to repent. The call to turn from sin to God.

There was a 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Presbyterian preacher by the name of Alexander Whyte. He was a great man. But he also had an awareness of the potential for evil within him that was never far from the surface. After one of his services a young woman came up to him. She said that she loved being in his presence because he was so saintly. A bit surprised Alexander Whyte looked at her and said, **"Ma'am, if you could look into my soul, what you would see would make you spit in my face."**

The closer we come to God the more we come to see the offensive nature of our sin. The more we come to understand our need to repent.

It is the Holy Spirit who brings us into agreement with God's Word which says, "**...all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.**" It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to agree that "**there is none who is righteous, no not one.**"

Many people find themselves overcome by sins. Sins that have brought them heartache, turmoil and desolation. These sinful bondages play havoc across all the social and economic layers of our nation. Therapists, physicians, and scientists are scrambling to find some medical or genetic cause to explain these sinful bondages.

However, only when a correct Biblical diagnosis is made, can the real solution be applied. Jesus teaches that sin is first found in the heart of a person long before that sin ever makes its outward manifestation. The sinless life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus is God's provision to help all of us to make a lasting change in our lives. There is only one thing that counts for eternity. There is only one that that can make us new and whole again and that is being washed clean by the blood of Jesus and becoming like Him. And that's the work of the Holy Spirit calling us to repentance. Becoming like Christ. Dying to sin and coming alive to righteousness. Taking off our filthy rags of selfishness, self-centeredness, greed and avarice and replacing them with the righteous robes of Christ.

Sanctification is our goal. Becoming holy as God is holy. That's the process that a repentant sinner, now saved, undergoes in becoming more like Christ. Our greatest goal in life should be to have a heart that hungers for the righteousness of Christ.

The Holy Spirit is the agent of change. He shows people their need for Christ. Achieving sanctification is not a do-it-yourself project. You must first have Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. First be surrendered to the Holy Spirit's leading as He quickens God's Word within your heart. Jesus is faithful. He will complete His good work within you.

Paul taught that the Holy Spirit's leading in a person's life is one of the evidences of a person's salvation. He wrote to the Romans, "**Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.**" He also warned them, "**...And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.**"

Only through the indwelling and empowering of the Holy Spirit, can a person be changed. Only the Holy Spirit can lead us to the abundant life which is found in Christ alone. If you want to go to heaven, you must repent of your sins and trust Jesus for your forgiveness. This is not only God's desire; it is also God's command. When God gives us a command, we don't discuss it or debate it. We obey it. No one likes to be commanded to do anything. But this is a command from Almighty God that applies to every one of us.

Since the fall into sin, God has been listening as people tried to justify their sins. Tried to explain away their transgressions. Made up excuses for their disobedience. You need read no further than the first few chapters of Genesis to see this is so.

When the Lord caught the first sinners, Adam and Eve, in their transgression, they didn't say, "Oops! You got us there, Lord. Yes, we sinned." Instead, Adam, said, "I only did it on the advice of my wife... who, by the way is the woman that You gave me Lord." In Adam's eyes, he might have been kind of guilty, but the real culprits were Eve and the Lord, Himself. When God approached Eve, she had an excuse too. "It's true, Lord, I did sin, but I only did so after receiving some expert advice from that talking snake."

When Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517, he began with this crucial statement: **"When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'Repent', He called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."**

If you are a Christian, repentance is to be part of your daily life. Part of our daily walk with God. It is foundational to a growing Christian life.

That being the case the BIG question is: "Who can forgive sins?" Come to Bethlehem and see but don't let your focus remain there. Follow the miracles. The words of God the Creator who became incarnate, present in flesh and bone found lying in a manger. Follow Him to the cross and empty tomb. Acknowledge His ascension to the throne in heaven. Let His Holy Spirit urge your heart to repent.

Jesus says, **"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with Me."** This is the glorious picture of the Lord Jesus at the door of the sinner's heart. Christ will not break down the door as a policeman on a raid or as a fireman busting in to save a child. The Lord Jesus has already unlocked all the doors that would prevent you from entering through heaven's door... the strong doors of sin and death.

Christ is, right now, graciously by His Word and Holy Spirit, gently knocking at the only door that keeps Him out of your life. The only door that keeps you from having communion with Him. The door of your spiritual heart must be opened to Christ. He must be invited in. Those who open the door to Him shall enjoy His salvation, presence and peace as He gives fresh supplies of grace and comfort.

Christ makes kindly visits. Sadly though, He finds the doors of too many hearts bolted shut with ignorance, unbelief and sinful prejudices. As He knocks, God's Holy Spirit draws upon your conscience to open the door. Yet ignorance will encourage you to believe that living the best life you can on your own will be good enough. God's Word warns, **"There's a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death."**

Unbelief may keep you from accepting the words of Jesus, **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me"** and, **"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again."** Don't let ignorance, unbelief or sinful prejudices keep you saying, "I am not ready yet. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe next week. There's still time."

When Jesus finds the door to your heart shut, He doesn't immediately withdraw. He waits patiently, not wanting any to perish. However, "I am not ready yet" could have eternal consequences. It is an eternally wrong answer. Open the door. Let Christ in.

Jesus said, **"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me. In My Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going... I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."**

The Holy Scriptures teach that heaven is a real place. It is a permanent place. It is a personal place. It is also a holy place. The writer of the book of Hebrews tells us this powerful truth about the character of those who will be in heaven, **"Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."**

The Holy Spirit moved the apostle Peter to write, **"...just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: Be holy, because I am holy."** Holiness embraces purity and moral integrity. Those called to be God's children are to be like Christ. The blood of Christ is not a cover up of sin. It's a purifying source that cleanses all sin from those who come to Him in repentance and receive Him as Savior and Lord. The simplest understanding of holiness is that of loving conformity to God's commands and to His Son. Heaven is where God is who is holy. The people who are there with Him are those who long in their hearts and live for the holiness of God. The ones who are in heaven know the truths of 1 John 1:9, **"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."** Heaven awaits all who have received Christ by faith and through Him the holiness of God.