

Grace for failures

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Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 00] As we continue through Leviticus this evening, we come to a description here of a pair of different sacrifices that address sin in various forms.

Most modern English translations call the first of these the sin offering and then move on to the other as the guilt offering. There's other terms that might help us to get to grips with what's going on with these offerings, and we'll come to that in time.

But these are pretty good terms to be going on with. These explain reasonably well what's going on. So we're dealing with the question of sin, sin and what you do about it.

And the title for the sermon tonight gives away the most important point. There is grace for failures. In these Old Testament chapters, we find evidence of God's grace.

We find his provision for those who fail, those who fall short, those who miss the mark. And thinking about sin on the basis of these chapters, I think there are three common mistaken beliefs that are corrected by what we find here.

[1 : 05] So the first mistaken idea is that sin doesn't really matter. These chapters respond to the trivialization of sin. Secondly, some people mistakenly believe that all sin is equal, that it is all at the same degree of seriousness.

Well, here we see variation in the nature of sin, evident in the different responses that are expected. Third mistaken belief, sin cannot be dealt with.

Well, these chapters show us a way forwards. All three of these mistaken beliefs are certainly alive and well in the world at large. And I think are probably alive and well in the church at large as well. Maybe in most cases, we'd deny these kinds of understandings if we're asked directly. If somebody says to you, can sin be dealt with? Well, we know the answer is yes, there is a way that sin can be dealt with.

But our behavior and how we speak when we're not carefully thinking things through, these often show that in practice, we drift into these kinds of ways of thinking, these mistaken ideas.

[2 : 19] And so I hope that we will ourselves be strengthened and encouraged to think rightly about the nature of sin and its remedy as we consider these chapters.

So first then, the trivialization of sin. We can see this kind of trivialization, perhaps most obviously, in the articles that you find online offering five sinfully good chicken wing recipes.

Or, you know, Magnum advertising their seven deadly sins range of ice creams. Sin is a small thing. Sin is an advertising mechanism. But perhaps more seriously, this idea that sin doesn't really matter is at play when people say some variation of, I'm basically a good person.

Or say, well, I try my best. That's all that anyone can ask. The adverts equate sin with pleasure. We want to sin even.

Or then our inclination to think of people as basically good. Or to think of people as trying their best. Well, that's to say that failing doesn't matter.

[3 : 31] And we excuse ourselves in similar sorts of ways, don't we? We say everybody does it. It's not that big a deal. We say, I tried to do the right thing, but I just couldn't.

We think to ourselves, I deserve a night off from doing the right thing. I've been working so hard recently. I can indulge myself just this once. Do things my way this time.

We trivialize sin. We act as though it doesn't matter. But notice how chapter four begins. When anyone sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the Lord's commands.

Similarly, verse 27 later on comes to talk about coming to realize your guilt after the fact. That sin can be something that's so minor that you don't even realize you've done it at the time.

Sin can be unintentional. Sin can be unobserved. These chapters, these provisions for sacrifice, they show us just how serious sin really is.

[4 : 44] That even sin so minor that they're in danger of going unnoticed must be paid for. There is a consequence to all sin, however trivial it might seem.

These animals that are being sacrificed, they die in place of the one who has sinned. Maybe we don't think it's that big a deal to fail to speak up when called to testify, chapter five, verse one. But this passage makes clear that is a sin deserving of death. It's easy to trivialize this inadvertent sin, the negligence that causes problems for somebody else.

I didn't mean it. I wasn't trying to hurt anyone. There's an example here in chapter five of a rashly made vow. Maybe we think you should just be let off for the silly things that you say you'll do while you're drunk.

Or perhaps more for those of you listening to me. Perhaps we're inclined to say that it's no big deal to say to somebody that you'll help them out, but then it slips your mind and you don't actually do it.

[5 : 47] Yes, we're inclined to say no big deal. It was just a mistake. Never mind. Move on. But the Bible says let your yes be yes and your no be no. Doing what you say matters.

And if you fail to do that, well then to bring a sacrifice is the appropriate response. Even unintentional sins need to be taken care of by this kind of sacrificial ritual.

There's another potential dimension of the trivialization of sin that's also flagged up by the nature of these instructions for sacrifice.

Maybe you remember a couple of weeks ago the burnt offering, chapter one. That was said to be accepted to make atonement. So if the burnt offering makes atonement, then what's this sin offering here in chapters four and five adding to that if atonement is already made?

Part of the problem in that way of thinking is that the confusion arises from the fact that we tend towards quite a minimalist or reductionistic view of sin.

[6 : 53] That we don't think on the wider impact of sin. Maybe we think about sin breaking a relationship with God. Kind of forming that chasm between us and God.

And we're right to think that way. It does do that. But that isn't all it does. Sin does more than that. Having sinned, therefore, we're in need of propitiation.

We need God's anger to be averted. We need forgiveness from God. The covenant relationship between us and God is threatened by God's appropriate anger. And atonement is required.

And it seems to be primarily the burnt offering that addresses that dimension. That chasm between us and God. But then as Gordon Wenham puts it, sin has other side effects as well.

If someone steals something, the owner will not only feel aggrieved, but hope for restitution of the property if the thief is caught. This is the key idea in the reparation offering, the guilt offering that we'll come on to in due course.

[7 : 53] But here with the sin offering, this is also called the purification offering. And that gives us a clue to what it's accomplishing. Wenham says sin not only angers God and deprives him of his due, it also makes his sanctuary unclean.

A holy God cannot dwell amid uncleanness. So the purification offering purifies the place of worship so that God can be present among his people.

So this purification offering, this sin offering, it seems to be designed more to deal with this kind of subsidiary problem. Because sin has knock-on effects.

We're maybe not inclined to think in terms of a place being polluted by sin. But the Bible talks in those terms.

Chapter 18, we come to a variety of laws about sexual relations. And at the end of chapter 18, we read, But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the foreigners residing among you must not do any of these detestable things.

[8 : 59] For all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.

Do you see, the land is defiled by the actions of its inhabitants. Sin is serious. It has far-reaching and long-lasting impact.

Sin can create a stain that we cannot possibly ourselves hope to eradicate. Wenham again, he points to the example of Lady Macbeth.

You know, getting up each night to wash her hands repeatedly. Trying to get rid of the blood that she believes is still clinging to her. The blood's not physically present.

The washing isn't going to help. But actually, she's recognized a reality. The stain of her sin is real. Sin isn't something to be trivialized.

[10:05] No, sin is so serious that multiple sacrifices may be required to address these different dimensions of its effects. Sin is serious.

It is not trivial. There's a potential New Testament version of this trivialization of sin as well. Of kind of treating sin as a small thing that doesn't really matter.

Because we might conceivably say, well, Jesus has dealt with it. Jesus has dealt with all of it. So sin doesn't really matter. Now, lots could be said on that.

But for now, let me limit myself to two responses to that attitude. First, Jesus' sacrifice actually does the exact opposite. Rather than trivializing sin, the fact that Jesus had to come and to die in order to fully, finally, and definitively deal with sin, actually, that shows just how serious sin really is.

Just how significant a problem it causes. That Jesus' blood actually provides not only propitiation, but also purification. Here's Hebrews 9.

[11:16] How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God.

So he obtains eternal redemption and he cleanses our consciences. He provides both propitiation and purification. Sanctification, cleansing, purification.

Jesus' infinitely worthy blood deals with the seriousness of our sin in every respect. Second response to that New Testament trivialization.

Notice that the New Testament still expects confession. This sense of confession is present in the sin offering. Chapter 5, verse 5 says, When anyone becomes aware that they're guilty in any of these matters, they must confess in what way they have sinned.

That confession there in Leviticus 5, this confession probably takes place in the context of that hand-laying ritual. Do you remember that part of the sacrificial process? You bring your lamb and you lay your hand on it that kind of identifies with that lamb.

[12:44] But in the process of that ritual, it's probably then that you are to confess your sin. Part of the presentation of the sin offering, you declare publicly, before at least the priest and really before a bunch of other people too, this is why I'm bringing this lamb.

This is what I have got wrong. This is my sin that I confess before God's people and before God himself. Well, so too in our New Testament era.

Confession is a prerequisite of our cleansing. 1 John 1, verse 9. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

There's the promise of cleansing, the promise of purification. But the if isn't just there for fun.

Confession is expected of us because sin is serious.

So we've corrected the trivialization of sin. Second misunderstanding, corrected by these chapters on sacrifice. Sometimes we think or even say all sin is equal.

[14:05] Now, saying all sin is equal may well be coming from a healthy place. Because behind that statement is often a recognition of clear biblical truth. Like the fact that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, Romans chapter 3.

And so too James writes in chapter 2 of his letter, For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. There is a sense in which you can say all sin is equal.

It may well be that when we say that, what we mean to say is all sin is sufficient to cut people off from a relationship with God. That any sin has that effect, cuts us off from God.

In these verses we have instructions for the anointed priest. The first block in chapter 4. We have instructions for the sin of the whole community. We have instructions for the sins of the leaders.

And we have instructions for ordinary people. Samuel Schultz points out, in these verses we see, that no religious or civil leader was so prominent that his sin was condoned.

[15:13] Nor was any man so insignificant that his sin was ignored. All sin needs to be dealt with. All sin is serious.

To minimize that, to trivialize sin, is very dangerous. That is true. All sins are equal in that sense. But it's not quite true that all sins are equal.

Numbers 15 makes a very clear distinction. A distinction between those who sin unintentionally, who must make an appropriate sacrifice, and then on the other hand, those who sin defiantly, who

must be cut off.

The sins are not treated the same. Similarly, Jesus. Luke chapter 12 says, There is a distinction in people's level of culpability.

And that same idea seems to be in play here in Leviticus 4 and 5. Because did you notice that just like with the burnt offerings last time, there were again a number of different options for sacrifice presented.

[16:33] But here, instead of them being kind of equivalent alternatives that the worshiper chooses between, well, here instead we're told exactly what's expected of each person. That anointed priest, chapter 4, verse 3, he must bring a young bull without defect as the sin offering.

And so too if the whole community sins, as verses 13 and 14 show. Young bull, young bull. But the next section is concerned with a leader of some kind. Well, he's expected to bring a male goat. It is a lesser offering. There is less monetary value in it. And then for the member of the community, it's a female goat or a female lamb. And if they can't afford that, then two doves or pigeons, chapter 5, verse 7, or even some fine flour, verse 11.

Now here, this variation from the bull down to the flour, this variation now reflects not so much the varying wealth, but rather reflects the person standing in the community or their degree of impact on the community at large.

Because the high priest, the anointed priest, his job is to represent the people. And so his sin obviously has an impact on the whole people.

[17:46] And so his sin is treated in some sense especially seriously. Guilt is conferred from his sin onto all the people. And so this very costly sacrifice is required.

We who teach will be judged with greater strictness, wrote James in chapter 3 of his letter. There is a variation in what's expected, dependent upon one's position.

And maybe this variation, this inequality of different sins, becomes even more readily apparent when we move from the sin offering onto the guilt offering. The instructions for this begin, chapter 5, verse 14.

Now here in these guilt offerings, reparation offerings as they're sometimes called, here the issue that prompts the bringing of this sacrifice, it's not 100% clear. We're told someone sinned with regard to the Lord's holy things, verse 14.

Verse 17 is broader, someone does what's forbidden in any of the Lord's commands. And chapter 6 starts to move into deceiving one's neighbor and lies about lost property and so on. So there's some pretty broad categories, it seems, including both things that are obviously sins against God, the holy things, sins against the holy things.

[19:02] This probably includes like a failure to bring the properly required tithe or some misuse of the tabernacle complex in its equipment. And that moves through to things that we naturally think of as sins against one's neighbor rather than sins against God per se.

But God is the enforcer of your neighbor's property rights. And a sin against your neighbor is therefore a sin against God. So you need forgiveness from God.

But in this reparation offering, God chooses to make that forgiveness contingent upon the payment of reparation to your neighbor.

God offers forgiveness only to those who are truly repentant and who are willing to demonstrate that by putting things right. There's times when it might be right and proper for a church elder, that it might be proper for an elder to go and to assure somebody that their sins are forgiven.

Proper to go and to point to the promises of Scripture and say, look, you are forgiven. That same verse from 1 John, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

[20:19] You can say on that basis in some situations, your sins are forgiven. Church minister might say that to someone, you are forgiven. But what I certainly cannot do is make that kind of a declaration in a situation where there is clearly no true repentance, where there is no willingness to make appropriate restitution.

He can't absolve the murderer who refuses to turn himself in to the police. You can't absolve the petty thief who won't go back to the shopkeeper and say, I took this. I'm sorry.

Here it is back with interest. You can't absolve the adulterer who continues in the sinful relationship. You cannot absolve the angry man who will not even apologize to his children whom he has terrified.

You cannot absolve those who refuse to accompany their supposed repentance with appropriate restitution. This reparation is expected, is a condition of forgiveness.

You cannot, as a church elder, declare forgiveness in those kinds of situations because there's every evidence that God does not forgive such a person. Cleansing from sin is for the truly repentant, and that is evidenced by their willingness to make reparation.

[21 : 36] But to return to my point about the variation that not all sin is equal, see here that the reparation laid down is the amount by which somebody's injured plus one-fifth.

Now that provision, that stipulation for the amount of reparation, that makes perfect sense when you fail to adequately care for someone else's property. The compensation they receive, it is proportionate to the inconvenience that they have suffered, whatever that might be.

But why would that stipulation apply when no other people are harmed when you've only impacted God? Your neighbor maybe needs recompense to go and feed his family, but God doesn't.

God doesn't need your extra one-fifth. God doesn't depend upon your proportion at reparation, and yet he expects it. God is recognizing variation in the severity of sin.

It's worse to fail to bring a tithe of a thousand shekels than to fail to bring a tithe of ten. The reparation expected is therefore different. Not all sin is equal.

[22 : 54] Sin is not trivial. Sin is not all equal. But underlying this, there is a very simple point to make as we draw towards a close. Sin can be dealt with.

There's grace available for mistakes. God's people here in Leviticus aren't left wondering what to do. God lays out a path for them. Several times in these chapters, we're told, the priest will make atonement for them for the sin they have committed, and they will be forgiven.

Forgiveness is possible. That's there in the last verse of chapter 4 and in several other places in the surrounding sections. You make your sacrifice, the priest makes atonement, you are forgiven.

Sin separates us from God. Sin justly provokes God's wrath and indignation against us. Sin purloons us and our lives and the people around us and our societies and our towns and our nation. Sin must be paid for. And God made a way. For the Israelite, provided he didn't despise the Lord's provision, he could obtain forgiveness.

[24 : 08] If he looked at God's set-out procedure and chose to ignore it, well then he would remain dead in his transgressions. He would remain polluted by sin.

But if he came and followed the path that God had given him, forgiveness was there to be received. And the same is true today. The same is true that God has made a way.

God has opened a path of abundant joy and blessing. God has opened a path of restoration and forgiveness. He's opened a route of restored fellowship with him with all of our sins washed away. But there is only God's provided way. For any who choose to despise that provision, for any who look at that forgiveness that's offered in Jesus' name and dismiss it as unnecessary because sin is trivial, or rubbish it as ridiculous, or disregard it as insufficient, or treat it with contempt by claiming to trust Jesus' forgiveness while simultaneously continuing willfully in sinful rejection of him.

For those who despise God's provision in whatever way, there isn't an alternative route. One way and no other. The door stands open.

[25 : 23] Jesus' way is available. So if you have not walked through that door, tonight's the night.

It's time. Don't mess about. Don't think there'll be another opportunity. Don't think it's too busy around Christmas. I'll think about it in the new year. No. Tonight is the night because there is no other way.

There is no other door. Walk through this one. Walk down the path that God has provided and talk to someone about it. If you haven't done that before, make it official.

Speak to me. Speak to any of the elders. We want to be praying for you. And we'd love for you to become a communicant member of the church as well, participating in the life of the church in all of its fullness. If you haven't walked through the door, tonight is the night.

And if you've wandered away, come back. Come back to this path of forgiveness and hope. Come back by the same means that you approached in the first place.

[26 : 25] Come back and be washed by the precious blood of Jesus. This blood that, unlike the blood of bulls and goats and lambs, really does fully and completely take away your sins.

God has made a way. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we really do rejoice that you have opened a way for us.

A way that is available whatever the seriousness of our sins. However egregious they might be, however much we have been polluted by them, however much we have wounded those around us by our sinfulness, however much we have wounded you by our rejection of you and neglect of you, however much that the blood of our Savior Jesus is fully sufficient to cover every single sin. We see the weight of it. We see the seriousness of it. And we rejoice that the price has been paid. Keep us rejoicing in your goodness to us this day and evermore, we pray.
Amen.