

Dangerous Ideas: Anselm of Canterbury

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[0 : 00] It seems like a lifetime ago to me, but when I finished university in Aberdeen and started working in research and development, it was driven home to me that if I wanted to communicate and get ahead in the business world, then I needed to speak French. And so I made it my goal to speak as much French as I could, all the better that the company I worked for had its head office in Lyon in France. I'm out of the loop today, so I couldn't really tell you what language you need to learn if you want to get ahead in the business world. If you wanted to get ahead in the medieval world, Latin was the language you needed to master. If you lived in 11th century Europe, but you didn't speak or write in Latin, you were nobody. As such, a group of churchmen grew up who we call the Latin Scholastics. The two most famous of these are Thomas Aquinas and Anselm of Canterbury.

Anselm of Canterbury lived 400 years after Aidan of Lindisfarne, who we looked at last Sunday evening. By that time, the Celtic church had largely disappeared and what we call now the Roman Catholic Church was dominant in England. The first Roman Catholic missionaries had landed in Kent in southern England, and so it was natural that Canterbury in Kent should be the most prominent seat in the medieval English church. Even today, the senior figure in the Church of England is the Archbishop of Canterbury. Anselm himself was born in northern Italy. At a young age, he became a monk in a Benedictine monastery in Normandy in northern France, and in 1078 he was made its abbot.

In 1093, he was made the Archbishop of Canterbury. He didn't always enjoy the best of relationships with the English kings, with William Rufus and Henry I especially, often being angry with Anselm. He died in 1109 AD. Now, theologically, Anselm was orthodox. He loved the writings of Augustine of Hippo. But as with Aidan, one of the reasons that I've chosen Anselm is because of his godliness.

Listen to what this one church historian writes about Anselm. He was a man of spotless life, of unflinching devotion to truth and righteousness, and a profound reverence, and listen to this, a burning love for Christ. A burning love for Christ.

If you look on the internet, you'll find many of Anselm's prayers and meditations, and they're well worth reading and thinking through. The point is that before Anselm was an archbishop for Christ, he was a disciple of Christ. His motto in life was, I believe in order to understand. Here we have a man who is on fire for Christ. Robert Manning McShane, our own Robert Manning McShane, once said, a holy minister is an awful weapon in the hands of God. And if McShane was right, and we think he was, then Anselm was one of God's greatest weapons in England.

[3 : 47] Even though I'm highlighting these great men like Anselm and Aidan and next week John Wycliffe, they'd want to be remembered not for their great achievements for Jesus, but for their faith in Jesus. Because for them, that was the important thing. If you want to follow in the footsteps of Aidan and Anselm and John Wycliffe, then the most important thing you need to be is on fire for Jesus.

Well, if the man we want to focus on this evening is Anselm, the dangerous idea we want to focus on is contained in one of the most famous books in the world. It has the Latin title, *Cur Deus Homo*, which when translated means, Why the God-Man? Or perhaps even, Why did God become a man? The problem he was addressing in this book was why God needed to become incarnate of the Virgin Mary, to be born, to live as a human being.

Why Bethlehem? Why Bethlehem? Why Christmas? Why the cross? Now, before he had written *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm knew that the church understood the answers, but had not perhaps sufficiently encoded the answers. Anselm realized that what's at stake here is nothing less than salvation itself. That if God had not become a man, a human being, we would all still be in our sins,

and nothing we could do for God would be sufficient to save us. That there was no other way God could have saved us without himself having become a human being and dying in our place for our sin. Now, Curdeus Homo takes the form of discussion between Anselm and one of his students, whose name is B-O-S-O. I suspect it might be Bozo. Is that the name from which we get our word for someone who's stupid, Bozo? And Bozo's asking him what the need for God to become a man is. Loosely basing our thoughts around Hebrews chapter 10, we want to understand Anselm's argument in three great statements. You're going to need to put your thinking caps on tonight, but these are three great statements which, if you can understand, you will have an assurance of faith that you have never had before. First, sin is an infinite offence against an infinite God.

[6 : 37] Second, God requires an infinite payment to satisfy infinite holiness. And third, Jesus' sacrifice of himself is of infinite worth because he is the infinite God. Before you switch off and think of tonight's dangerous idea as kind of a relevant fragment of medieval church history, belongs somewhat to medieval literature. Let me tell you two things about Anselm's arguments. First, without these arguments, there would be no salvation for any one of us. If God had not become a man, we're all headed for a lost eternity. But since Anselm was right, by faith, we're headed for paradise. And secondly, on a practical level, this is the best argument to use against the cults, Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons, the other cults, who insist that Jesus was just an angel but not God. If Jesus was not God, our sins still stand against us and we are doomed. I've used it quite often with Jehovah Witnesses at my door and they've never yet had an answer. First of all then, here's the first statement. Sin is an infinite offence against an infinite God. Sin is an infinite offence against an infinite God. I guess of all the words which have fallen out of fashion in the modern Christian evangelical church, sin is top. Listen to preachers on telly and they'll tell you that the reason you should become a Christian is because it'll make you healthy and wealthy. This is a very far cry from the gospel faithfully handed down where ultimately salvation is from sin. Even the youngest child in Scotland once knew that Jesus died to take my sins away.

But if there is no sin, Jesus' death has no meaning. Sin is really a very big word without which the cross has no meaning. What then is sin? Well, for Anselm, sin is a debt. It's a debt. He writes, sin is not to pay God what we owe him. But then we say, well, I owe God nothing. So what do I need to pay him back for? Anselm responds by reminding us that God is our Lord and our creator, whether we choose to believe that or not. And as such, we are under obligation to him. We owe him praise and honor.

He writes, he who does not render this honor, which is due to God, robs God of his own and dishonors him.

And this is sin. So you see, for Anselm, for the Orthodox Christian church before him, and ever since him, to sin is to fail to give God the honor he is due.

Paul says in Romans 3.23, Now, if you should think this harsh, that as creatures of our creator, we owe him our honor.

[10 : 26] If you should think of this as some form only of medieval mind control, then remember that the modern church's number one evangelistic manual called Two Ways to Live starts at this very point. But as creatures of God, we owe him our honor and our failure to give him that honor is sin.

I remember a Christian friend I used to work with when I worked down south. He came from a charismatic perspective, and at times he could be just a wee bit crazy. He used to tell me that he would go for days without sinning. But for him, sin was really rather a relatively rare occurrence. Little did he realize that every second of every minute of every day of every year, he was sinning by not giving to God the glory God is due, because ultimately that is the definition of sin.

Then you say to me, but Colin, this doctrine is really harsh. I don't like squashing ants.

I don't like killing any living creature. But you know, if an ant starts crawling up my leg, I've got no qualms about squashing it. The guilt of killing the ant does not keep me up at night.

[11 : 56] Really, it doesn't. But supposing I ran over my next door neighbor's dog, well, I tell you, that would keep me up for a few nights. And supposing I killed another man, that wouldn't just keep me up for one night or for a few nights.

I would never sleep again. So what's the difference? Is it not because a man is worth more than a dog, which is worth more than an ant?

To take the life of an ant, while it's no big deal, is something I don't go out to do. To take the life of a man is a huge deal, because a man is made in God's image.

You see, the higher the worth of something you sin against, the more serious the offense. That is the basic pillar of our justice system.

But I have done no more to this man, you say, than to this ant. I killed the ant. I killed the man.

[13:02] I've done the same thing. Why is my crime more severe? Because I killed the man. Why does the judge not sentence a child to life imprisonment for plucking the wings from a fly?

The answer is, of course, because of the worth of the thing or person against whom you have committed the crime. Even within human society, nothing can be quite as serious as offending against those who are closest to you and who love you most.

And so again, our justice system recognizes the severity, not just of a crime based on the worth of this or that, but your relation to it.

So for example, the murder of a father by a son. The murder of a daughter by a mother. These are especially sick crimes under our justice system because they are committed against the most basic loving relationships.

The more we love someone, the more serious their crime against us is. Now perhaps you can see where I'm going with this.

[14:19] God is of infinite worth. And therefore, any offense we commit against him is by definition an infinite. He is infinitely more valuable than a human being who is more valuable than a dog who is more valuable than an ant.

Likewise, God loves us infinitely. And therefore, any sin we commit against him is an infinite sin. Let me say this again so that none of us are under any illusion whatsoever that this is the biblical, orthodox, Christian doctrine at best.

He who does not render this honor which is due to God, robs God of his own and dishonors him.

And this is sin. And of course, we all know this because every Sunday we pray, forgive us our debts.

And the debt that we're praying for forgiveness is the debt of the honor we owe to God as a function of his being God and we being his creatures and a function of his lovingness.

If we do not worship him as he deserves to be worshipped and if we do not live for him like he has told us to do in his word, then we owe him an infinite debt that though we may spend eternity trying to pay it all back, we'll never succeed.

[15:51] This then is the first of Anselm's arguments. Sin is an infinite offense against an infinite God. If God is of infinite worth, as undoubtedly he is, then any offense that we commit against him is of infinite seriousness.

Okay, Anselm's second statement. God requires an infinite payment to satisfy infinite holiness.

God requires an infinite payment to satisfy infinite holiness. Think for a moment about a man who served 20 years for murder and then he's released.

Whether he's a reformed man or not, he'll save himself, well, look, I've paid my debt to society 20 years behind bars. The justice system which imprisoned him sentenced him to 20 years.

Those 20 years considered as the debt he owes society for the crime he has committed. We may think that 20 year sentence is not long enough, but that's what the law stipulated.

[17:14] And so that released prisoner is absolutely correct in what he says. We may question the severity of sentencing. We may even engage with the argument of restorative as opposed to retributed justice.

But however we look at it, he has paid his debt to society. A guilty murderer is given 20 years in prison. He serves 20 years in prison.

His debt is fully paid. Now let's go back from the Shawshank Redemption to Anselm of Canterbury.

If Anselm is right that sin is an infinite offence against an infinite God, then it follows that God requires an infinite payment to satisfy infinite holiness.

The infinite holiness of God has been offended against. An offence which, because it's infinite, requires infinite punishment.

In other words, to go back to that prisoner, he would need to spend an infinite length of years in prison to pay his debt to God. It took him 20 years to pay his debt to society for murdering another man.

[18 : 28] It will take him infinite years to pay his debt off to God for sinning against him. Now, of course, this is the point at which we stumble, because what we're talking about here really is hell.

Where sinners spend eternity paying off their debt to God for their sins and being punished forever. Anselm understood only too well what a difficult doctrine this was to swallow.

Certainly his student, Bozo, was struggling to understand the necessity of God's punishment.

Because Bozo thought he could pay off his debt to God by personal devotion.

By repentance on his part. By committing himself to the priesthood, to a life of celibacy. To prayer. To serving others and so on.

That's the way religious people think. They think they can pay this infinite debt off to God by their own religious or moral efforts. That these efforts, these religious commitments, are enough to assuage the wrath of God.

[19 : 43] And there follows on page 228 of my edition of Courtais Homa, which perhaps is the most famous book that he ever wrote and contains some of the most famous words he ever wrote.

There is on page 228 of my edition these words. He says to Bozo, you have not as yet estimated the great burden of sin.

You have not as yet estimated the great burden of sin. We may struggle greatly with the doctrine of endless punishment. But the reason for that is that we have not sufficiently understood the infinite offence our sins have caused, the infinite holiness of God.

We have not as yet estimated the great burden of our sin. The great burden of our sin is way too great a debt to be paid off by our own personal devotion.

It is too great a debt to be paid off by a life of asceticism or self-denial, a life given to the priesthood or to prayers. If we think that we can pay our dues to God for the sins that we have committed by anything we can do, then we have not as yet estimated the great burden of sin.

[21 : 05] And though we say it with tears, if we say that hell is unjust, then we too have as yet estimated the great burden of sin.

That's broadly what the writer is saying in Hebrews chapter 10, that the law, the law of God's perfect requirements cannot be kept by human beings.

But even if it could, even if human beings could keep God's law perfectly, it would still be insufficient for salvation because God requires an infinite payment to satisfy infinite holiness.

For God to do any other would make him unjust. And if God was unjust, then he's no kind of God we want or need.

Anselm's third statement is the clincher. Anselm's third statement. Jesus' sacrifice of himself is of infinite worth because he is the infinite God.

[22 : 16] Jesus' sacrifice of himself is of infinite worth because he is the infinite God. Well, so far so good. There's nothing in Anselm's reasoning which goes against the plain teaching of scripture.

Bozo thought he could pay his debt to God by living a better life or by devoting his life to God, becoming a priest, whatever. But that's hardly infinite payment, is it?

The Old Testament Jews thought they could pay their debt off to God by the offering of bulls and goats. But these bulls and goats are but animals. And as we have already agreed, of lesser worth and value than human beings.

The writer to the Hebrews says in Hebrews 10 verse 4, it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. The offense is simply too great. What then is sufficient payment of our infinite debt to God?

Is it to sacrifice ourselves? Well, no. We owe. We are worth less than what we owe to God. We are worth less than what we owe to God.

[23 : 31] Is it for an angel to sacrifice himself? No. Because the death of a finite, limited being, however glorious, is not enough to cover the payment of an infinite offense.

I think we can see now where Anselm is going. There is only one payment which will satisfy divine justice on account of our infinite offense against it.

And that payment must be of infinite worth. And so we come to Jesus. It is notable in Hebrews 10 verse 5 that having just insisted upon the impossibility of the blood of bulls and goats taking away sin, the writer immediately says, therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said, sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.

And then in verse 14, as we continue, we read, by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The contrast is really too great for any of us to miss.

The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin. The sacrifice of Jesus makes us perfect. Christ's sacrifice of himself pays our debt to God in full.

[25 : 00] There is only one kind of payment which can pay off our infinite debt to an infinite God on account of the infinite offense our sins have caused him.

And that is an infinite kind of payment. And the only one who can offer such an infinite payment is God alone. Because God alone is infinite.

Now I know this all sounds really rather complicated. It's not really. It's no more than what the Bible says. To slightly change the words of the hymn we knew as children, there was no other worth enough to pay the price of sin.

He only could unlock the gates of heaven and let us in. The only kind of sacrifice which can pay off our infinite debt to an infinite God on account of the infinite offense our sins have caused him is an infinite sacrifice.

And since only God himself is infinite, he sacrificed himself. That is why God had to become a man. That is the reason for Bethlehem's cradle.

[26 : 20] That is the reason for Golgotha's cross. For the incarnation of the Son of God. So that he could sacrifice himself, thereby paying the debt that we owed God.

An angel could not pay that debt. A man could not pay that debt. An animal cannot pay that debt. Only God himself can pay that debt.

Such an amazing truth. That though it's God who has been infinitely offended by our sin, yet in love it is God who pays the infinite price of our sin.

The infinitely worthy Son of God loves us so much that, according to Anselm, listen to these words, Christ preferred to suffer rather than that the human race should be lost.

Christ preferred to suffer rather than that the human race should be lost. And if you should ask me or Anselm or anyone else, how is it possible that God himself should die?

[27 : 30] Anselm answers, For all that a man can say or know, still deeper grounds of so great a truth lie concealed.

But the plain truth of the matter is this. The answer to Curdeus Homo, why did God become a man, was that only an infinite sacrifice was payment enough to atone for the infinite offense we have caused, an infinite God, by our sin.

Let me close tonight by just applying this text in one or two directions. First, if you have not yet placed your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, then know this, your sin still stands against you, and an infinite payment is required.

That payment can be made by Christ's sacrifice of himself upon the cross, or you can pay it off over the endless years of eternal punishment.

Which will it be for you? Second, this gives us great assurance in believing. This gives us great assurance in believing.

[28 : 50] Our sins have been fully paid for. The offense has all been taken away because Jesus Christ, the infinite sacrifice, has paid our infinite debt in full.

Sin confessed is paid for. Jesus himself paid it on the cross. We cannot pay God any more than we already have.

We rest assured this evening that if we have faith in Christ, we are completely forgiven. Thirdly, does this not fill us with great praise for the love and injustice of God?

God, that he loved us so much that though he was infinitely offended by our sin, he himself became the infinite payment required for our forgiveness.

That's how much he loves you this evening. Isn't this just simply marvelous? It should have been me on that cross, not God himself, but he endured eternal punishment on my account.

[30 : 03] There are a thousand more applications of Anselm's dangerous idea of Curdeus Homo. Let me finish with this one, and with this we go back full circle. Anselm was noted for his godliness and devotion to Jesus.

His biographer says he was on fire for Jesus. He was on fire for Jesus. You know, if knowing how much God himself gave so that we might be forgiven and set free from our debt, if that does not motivate us to live in the grace of holiness and devotion to Jesus, if that does not set us on fire for him, nothing will.

Don't you want to live out this gospel? Young men, don't you want to devote your lives to preaching this gospel, proclaiming this gospel?

Never mind Latin. Let the love of Christ be the language that we long to learn. Let us pray.
Let us pray.