

The Personal Fact

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] Well, the subject is sin, and it's a rather large subject to deal with, and I'm not quite sure how we're going to cope, but the fact is you can almost start anywhere and you're in bad shape.

The picture that you have in the scriptures here is a very powerful picture. It's a courtroom picture. The judge is sitting here like this behind his big desk and peering down at you, and you're standing here like this.

And over here is the... Yeah, the book table has already made its announcement.

You can... There's a... This is the courtroom scene, and basically everybody's against sin.

[1 : 17] You know, accountants make their business trying to figure out sin, and lawyers certainly make their business trying to justify it. And... No, no.

No, no. No. No. No. That's just to keep in touch with one of the great truths of our reality is that lawyers suffer a lot of abuse.

But, you know, there's the police department, and there's the security people, and everybody is anticipating that everybody else is going to sin. And so they were out to get it.

And this picture that you have in the scriptures today from the first chapter of Isaiah is a picture of God sitting in judgment on us peoples.

There probably should be more than one down here so that even you could find yourself included.

So this is the picture. And over here is the prosecuting attorney, the crown attorney, and he is bringing the charges against this, and this is God, and this is God, and these are the people who are in trouble.

[2 : 27] So that God is sitting in judgment on, but in this particular passage of scripture, he's giving the case against the people that he's dealing with.

And you know that lots of people don't like going to church, they don't like the music, or they don't like the long prayers, or they don't like the long sermons, or they don't like the ritual, or they don't like the ceremony, or they don't like the hypocrisy of the whole thing, and on and on they go.

And you can get a broad cross-section of criticism of the church anytime you want from almost anybody. You know, they'll have all sorts of reasons why they do go to this or don't go to that, and on and on it goes.

The lovely part about this passage of scripture is this is what God thinks of church. You know, it may startle you to find out that in verse 12, he in effect says, well, who asked you to come in the first place?

You know, which is a good question to answer as you go into church. The second thing he does in verse 13 is to say, incense and offerings I despise, festivals and new moons and religious convocations, those kind of activities which give to us a warm and holy feeling, God has very little use for as he talks to his people.

[3 : 53] And we are, as you know, on the eve of Thanksgiving weekend, the weekend when we devote three days to giving thanks.

That may be a slight exaggeration. But the fact is, the offering of our thanksgiving, I wonder how God receives it.

The offering of theirs, he said, he went on to say in verse 14, I hate it. I'm weary of it. I'm burdened by it. So you'll see that God is not particularly entranced by the process of worship.

And we of course think he should be. And that that's really what he likes. And because he likes it, we do it. And to find out that he doesn't like it is a bit unnerving.

And he says, you pray up your hands. And you make long prayers. And your hands are bloody.

[5 : 02] You know, you've got blood on your hands and yet you're holding them up in prayer.

You're holding them out for everybody to see them and there's blood on them. He says, you make

your prayers long, thinking that I will pay attention.

He says, you come before me and you are dirty, soiled, badly in need of a wash. And the fact is, I cannot stand the sight of you.

That's, you know, fairly outspoken. And it would be discouraging to most Sunday morning congregations who have gone to the trouble of putting on their best suits and considerable trouble to go to church with a strong sense of moral obligation and duty.

And they all get there and then God treats them that way. I can't stand the sight of you. So he says, if you want to come and you want to worship, then there are some things that are required.

That you break with evil. That you wash. That you learn to do good. That is, what you do is not good because you do it.

[6 : 08] It is good for other reasons. And you have to find out what those reasons are. You are to seek justice because it is lost or hidden. You are to correct oppression.

You see, a lot of people, I think we tend to think that we do good automatically. And that we do it, that God accepts a whole lot of things as good that nobody else would. And we don't need to learn how to do good.

And that we have to seek justice because in the whole ordering of our society, justice is very easily lost. And it's not done. And we lose it and we have a conspiracy to make sure it stays lost.

And God says, you're to seek it. You're to correct oppression. You're to defend the fatherless. You know, that national last night talking about the problem.

I guess it was the thing that follows the journal. It was talking about the problems in New York City and about, they use the expression, warehousing children. You know, that that's all they can do with them because these are children of parents on crack, children of parents with AIDS, children that are deformed.

[7 : 17] And they're literally not looking after them. They're warehousing them. You know, and Isaiah says, it says in Isaiah that we should defend the fatherless.

It's quite an indictment. You're to plead the cause of widows. A lot of widows are pleading their own very effectively these days.

But there's a different context and a different culture that they're coming from here. So that you have that picture. Then he goes on to say, come, let us reason together.

Now, what's happened, you see, is that the, what I would like you to notice is that the, the prosecuting attorney has come over here and said, okay, now let's reason together.

And it goes on to say, though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

[8 : 22] I was in Detroit once in the union headquarters, learning how unions worked and being spoken to. And it was lovely to see this Bible text up on the wall of the union headquarters, which said, come now, let us reason together.

And I always thought it was regrettable that they didn't go on to say, though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. They thought it could all done be by reason.

But what he does is try and bring them together and to get them to think about the problem, to see what can be done or how it can be done.

How are you going to deal with the fact that in our society, children are warehoused? How are you going to deal with the fact that widows are left destitute?

How are you going to deal with the fact of oppression that cannot be corrected or justice that is not sought? Or how can you do good or learn to do good?

[9 : 22] It's very hard. I mean, the survival is the great thing in our society. And learning to do good doesn't always agree with the necessity that survival places on you.

And so you're stuck. And so the defense attorney, as he comes over here and says, come, let us reason together, saith the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.

Though they be red like crimson, they shall be like wool. And what it is, in effect, is a kind of prophetic declaration that a primary exchange has got to take place.

The scarlet hands are complementary to the scarlet clothes they're wearing. The blood that is on their hands is also on their clothes.

Red, crimson, and it's an indictment of who they are. And he said, there it is on your hands. There it is on your clothes. I want to exchange it for something that is as white as snow.

[10:29] White like wool. And, you know, that's why, I mean, that's the verse, in a sense, that provides the background for that Negro spiritual when you sing, you know, down by the riverside.

I'm going to put on my long white robe down by the riverside, you know, and I'm going to put on my golden shoes and all those kinds of things. That somewhere in this indictment of the people of God, the indictment of their worship, God's telling them he's wearied by them, he's burdened by them, he doesn't know what they're trying to do there.

This indictment says there is the possibility for fundamental change, and that is, though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. That God is going to clothe them over with a white robe, a white which designates that sin is past and perfect relationships to God, that they are fit to stand before God in this white robe that he has provided for them.

So you have that kind of thing that needs to be done. Well, you see, our Christian gospel has one really primary difficulty, and the primary difficulty is that God can't be good and forgive sins.

[12:00] Now, we, in a sense, hedge on that a little bit and says, well, perhaps he can be good and forgive mine.

I would understand that. But that he should be good and forgive somebody else's is beyond my comprehension. And this is the basic fallacy because it goes against the whole religious instinct of our humanity, that God can't be good and forgive sins.

The other thing that we come up with is the problem that Paul talks about in Romans when he says, you know, shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?

That maybe that's the way we're to do it. You know, that God knows we're sinners and we know he's forgiving, so we go on doing what we do and he goes on doing what he does, and that's the way it all works out. You know, that God is good at forgiving and we're good at sinning, so we both do what we're good at.

And life works out that way. And that doesn't work either. Now, if you look at it, you see, basically our just, holy, religious, upright society says you can't forgive sins.

[13:24] It can't be done. And you know when it comes to somebody coming up, Jesus gave some wonderful illustrations that when you go up to somebody and wipe them over the cheek with the back of your hand, and he says, now turn the other one.

Well, our whole gut says that you don't do that. You know, it's by the time that's happened, your adrenaline is pumping hard and you're into it. You know, you can't do it.

And I think it's as basic as that to our whole human nature that sins have to be dealt with, sins have to be punished, sins cannot be forgiven. And if God says they can be forgiven, then on what grounds is it possible?

And that's the difficulty. You see, we don't forgive sins. We go after one another as hard as we can in order to make people pay for the sins that they've done against us.

If you forgive sins, you become a mark, you become vulnerable, and ultimately it costs too much. You can't pay the price of forgiving sin.

[14:35] It's just too expensive. And so we don't understand what God means when he says your sins are forgiven. And so we try and deal with it different ways, either by saying my sins are of no consequence and therefore don't need to be forgiven, or else by having an unrealistic world in which we see that other people's sins do need to be forgiven and not our own.

So what we do is we kind of resort to the ultimate solution. You know, we kill people. We get them out of the way because they don't deserve to live.

And basically in human society, that's what we've done. Generation after generation, century after century, people get in your way, wipe them out. That's all we really know how to do.

And they have it coming to them because they've asked for it. And so we resort to that. We try to deal with sin by the due process of law, but it becomes more and more and more difficult to deal with it because it's very costly.

When you look at the Ten Commandments, you'll see that what we've done is, in a sense, tried to justify a certain amount of covetousness because it makes the machinery of our society work.

[15:59] We try and justify a certain amount of lying because it's not what you say, but it's what people hear that counts. And if they hear something that's good, then it doesn't matter if you lied to them or something that's acceptable to them.

It doesn't matter if you've lied. You know, we've messed around with adultery. We've messed around with murder. We've justified stealing. We have dealt with our parents. We have abandoned the Sabbath day.

We have very little respect for anything as being ultimately holy, even the name of God. We don't understand idolatry and think it belongs to somebody a long time ago.

And we make ourselves our own God so that we've pretty well dealt with it. But having done that, you see, we've incurred a great price that has to be paid.

And our society is horribly in debt because we have tolerated a whole lot of things that we can't afford to pay for. And that's why, you know, that's why the law courts are booming and everybody is going after everybody and everybody is suing everybody.

[17:06] And it's just an attempt, in a sense, to survive in a world which doesn't forgive. And it doesn't forgive because it can't pay the price of forgiveness.

So how can God come along and say to you, your sins are forgiven? Who's going to pay the price? Well, you see, that's what is central to the whole Christian thing.

God deals with sin by himself becoming a sinner. And that's the heart of the good news.

The God who is judge over us, who prosecutes us, who defends us as our advocate, now becomes one of us in the person of Jesus Christ. And God pays the price.

Becoming a sinner, he is despised, rejected, scorned, spat upon, scourged, mocked, betrayed, condemned, and crucified. He pays the price for our forgiveness.

[18:10] So that we have what John describes as an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins. That is, when we stand under the just condemnation of God, God can say, I forgive you because of Jesus Christ, because of his death for you.

The price of your sin has been paid. You're forgiven because of Jesus Christ. So what happens is that that's the great innocence transfer.

That's how the robes that are red with blood, that are scarlet, that are crimson, become white as snow, that you are robed with the righteousness of Christ.

Christ has died in your place. And so when Paul preaches to the people of Athens and tells them about life and how it works, he says to them that God is going to judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.

The man he has given proof that he is to be the judge of all the world by raising him from the dead. That God has appointed that man to be the one by whom we are judged.

[19:40] So that the judge who sits in judgment on us is the same person who stood with us and suffered death on the cross.

Now, the heart of the Christian gospel is in that. That's what happened. That's the transfer that takes place. And when Isaiah tells you what you have to do in terms of learning to do good, seeking justice, correcting oppression, defending the fatherless, pleading the widow's cause, all those things, why would we do them?

What purpose would it serve? Would it further the benefit that I have? And of course it won't. It only furthers somebody else's benefit.

So why would you possibly, and under any circumstances, try and do it? The only reason that you would try and do it is because of what Christ has done for you.

Therefore, you would like to relate to somebody else. Christ has loved you and forgiven you.

Therefore, you are free and empowered to love and forgive somebody else in Christ's name, to bring the reality of that forgiveness to them.

[21:07] So, you see, central to our Christian faith and the whole question of sin is baptism. We're required to be baptized.

When you come to believe that God has forgiven you through Jesus Christ, and you come to recognize that God has in Christ done for you what you could never do for yourself, then you have to look at your own heart and say, well, how am I going to respond to that?

How can I respond to that reality? What can I do to respond to that? And what, when Peter, when Peter at the sermon on the day of Pentecost finds these people stricken because they suddenly realize what it's all about, they suddenly realize who this man is that they so recently crucified, they say, what shall we do?

And Peter says to them, you're to repent and to be baptized. And when you're baptized, you're taken and you're dunked in a tank of water.

And that's you dying. Baptism is a sacrament of death. You die in your baptism.

[22 : 26] That is, that's how you identify yourself with Jesus Christ. I notice Scott Peck in one of his books called *The People of the Lies* says that he was baptized in a non-ecclesiastical baptism.

I don't know how you get a non-ecclesiastical baptism, but whatever it was, he had it. But because he recognized the necessity of a point at which he identified himself with what God had done for him in Christ.

That was a kind of personal commitment to what God had done for him in Christ and a personal recognition that that's who he was. He was somebody who was dead under the just condemnation of God with Christ.

He was dead. And just as Christ was raised from the dead, so we are raised in Christ. And so the only life we have then is the life we have by God's gift of the Holy Spirit, which brings us to life in Christ.

And so you are an alien in the world in which you live because the life you have now is a life which commits you to Jesus Christ.

[23 : 45] That's the only thing that is significant about your life is your relationship to Jesus Christ. Everything else tends to be highly transitory. It may be very enjoyable and it may be very fulfilling and it may be very relaxing and it may be very restorative, but the reality at the heart of your being is not the sin which separates you from God, but the death of Christ and the forgiveness of God which brings you back into relationship to him.

And that relationship becomes the fundamental foundation of our whole Christian life. So that you can't go back.

You see, that's why when Paul asks that question in Romans that I referred to earlier and says, shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?

And his answer is, God forbid, how shall we that are dead to sin live any longer therein? You no longer have any commitment there. You are to, you are, you have your life only by the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

That's the only thing that's left of your life. And you see, I like this subject, you know, because of my tendency to like gloom better than glory, but I, but I like this subject because, you know, it was really the turning point in my life when I personally recognized that I was a sinner.

[25 : 22] I mean, I knew I was, but I couldn't, I couldn't acknowledge it publicly at all. I mean, I had all the, all the symptoms of guilt and failure, which goes with being a sinner.

But I, I didn't recognize, in fact, that I was a sinner in the full sense of, of what the New Testament means by that. And you see, the great, the reason it was such a great discovery for me was the recognition that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Not good people or not hypocritical people or not people that pretend or not people that try harder, but people who have failed. And the great embarrassment to us of the Christian gospel is that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

And that, that's so contradictory to all our ideals and to all our aspirations. We, we, we don't know what to do with that. And yet, it's at that point that the transaction is established.

And, that's the point at which though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

[26 : 36] That God gives us this status before him as a free gift of his amazing grace because of Christ's death on the cross.

So that, to know that you're a sinner and not compromise or mess around with that is the, is the opening of a door to the understanding of what it's all about and what God's purpose is in your life. Because people waste so much of their lives trying to prove they're not sinners and therefore never qualifying to what God wants to do for them. And when you find out, then, the door's open.

Let me pray. Our God, the inscrutable mystery of how you in your love sent your son Jesus Christ into the world knowing that he would come to the cross and how he in his obedience to you gave himself up to death in order that we who cannot escape the clutches of death might be, through Christ, able to give ourselves up to life, a life which can't be taken away.

Help us to understand that this is the, this is the focus of your gospel and give us hearts to believe and receive. We ask this in Jesus' name.

[28 : 03] Amen. Amen.