

The Abiding Power of the cross, Part 2

Selected Scriptures

I want to start by reading a text that our time of reflection will kind of unpack the themes in this text, and it's Romans 8, verses 1-4. So if you would turn there in your Bibles to Romans chapter 8, we'll begin reading verses 1-4. Paul says in this glorious affirmation, confirmation, deep conviction about the Gospel, he says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the spirit."

The cross means the end of our sinning and the beginning of our righteousness. The end of sinning, beloved, the beginning of righteousness. This is the essence of true freedom, really.

The real liberty is the end of sin. It's to no longer sin. Turn over to, if you will, to 1 John chapter 3. Just take a look, quick look at this passage as well. 1 John 3 and verse 4:

"Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness. Sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning. No one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him."

I don't know about you, but I've heard a lot of professing Christians who keep on sinning. They're fine with it. They say, "I'm not under your law, legalist, Pharisee. I'm under grace." And they continue in their sin. What does John say? "Anybody who keeps on sinning has neither seen him nor known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, just as he's righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

"No one who's born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he can't keep on sinning because

he's been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God and who are the children of the devil. Whoever does not practice righteousness, is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother."

Instead of the folly of sin, Jesus pointed to a future lived in the wisdom of righteousness, Matthew 13:43, "As the righteous will shine like the Sun in the kingdom of their Father." In speaking that way, Jesus is alluding back to Daniel 12:3, speaks of the resurrected saints as those who are wise, those who shall shine like the brightness of the sky above, those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever shining in the galaxy."

So it's written in Proverbs 4:18, "The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until the noonday." That's our future, beloved. That's what we are. That's what the cross means. So the cross means, first, the end of our alienation, the beginning of our adoption. Second, it means the end of death and the beginning of life. Third, it means the end of our enslavement, the beginning of our

freedom. Fourth thing, it means the end of sinning and the beginning of righteousness.

Fifth, all that means the cross is the end of our shame, the beginning of our glory; the end of shame, the beginning of glory. This is Ephesians 5:25-27, where Paul casts the cross of Christ into the beautiful imagery of marriage. Christ loved the church. He gave himself up for her. Why? "So he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she might be holy without blemish." Beloved, it's the end of our shame, the end of that which shames us, which is sin. It's the beginning of our glory. It's the beginning of our beauty. What we are has not yet come to be.

So the end of alienation, death, enslavement and sinning; and the beginning of adoption, life, freedom, righteousness and glorious beauty. And all that brings us to a sixth point: The cross means the end of darkness, the beginning of light, life-giving light, fruit-bearing light. This is pictured when Christ is on the cross and what we read earlier, Matthew 27:45: "From

the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour, and then at the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice saying, '*Eli, eli, lema sabachthani!*' and that means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"

Some unbelieving, apostate souls say Jesus is denying his Father on the cross. That couldn't be further from the truth. He said that phrase to point everyone to the twenty-second psalm, first line in that psalm, which is, "'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" so that they can see in that psalm the prophetic interpretation they witnessed there at the cross. "Then he cried out on the cross with a loud voice, yielded up his spirit."

He pierced the darkness by his death on the cross. Matthew 27:51 says, "Behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom," from heaven to earth, ripping that veil, the light of God from the holy of holy, shining forth from God to man, no longer veiled, open to all.

By the cross, "the Father has qualified us," Colossians 1:12, "to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He's

delivered us from the domain of darkness, transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son," which is a kingdom of life, a kingdom of light, because we've been adopted into his family, saved from death to life, set free from slavery to the freedom of God's people though "we were at one time were in darkness," Ephesians 5:8. Now we're light in the Lord, producing the fruit of life in all that is good and right and true.

And all that brings us to one more. Seventh: the cross means the end of sorrow in futility and the beginning of joy in fruitfulness. The end of futility: That's where sin and darkness and unrighteousness takes us, is to futility. Think about a hamster running on a wheel. I always wonder, "Why is it running on that wheel? It's not getting anywhere." And then I remember. It's got a very small brain. That's a sinner, a sinner with a very small, sin-polluted brain that runs in futility all his life, all her life.

The cross is the end of sorrow and futility; it's the beginning of joy and fruitfulness. Back to Romans 6 and verse 20, Paul says, "For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at

that time from the things of which you're now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you've been set free from sin and become slaves to God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God, the free gift of God, is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

We read earlier from Ephesians 4:18-19 about the futility of our former life in unbelief, darkness, and sorrow. But then in Christ, because of the cross, because of his cross, because of his atoning work, it says in Ephesians, let me get there myself. In chapter 4:20-24, it says that futility, that darkness, that darkened understanding, that alienation from the life of God, that hardness of heart, that callousness, sensuality, greed, impurity, "that is not the way you learned Christ. That's not the way you learned Christ, assuming you've heard about him or were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

The evidence of true salvation is the fruitfulness of the new self, the emerging outward manifestation in every Christian of true righteousness and holiness. The fruit, Paul says in Roman 6:22, it "leads to sanctification, its end, eternal life." Listen, holiness is the evidence of eternal life. Holiness is the evidence of eternal life working in you. If there is no holiness, my friend, there is no life.

Since the cross confronts our sinful condition, since it graphically illustrates God's hatred of sin, since the cross purchases our full salvation, what we're saved from and what we're saved to, would it make any sense at all that the cross fails to sanctify us? I submit that it would not.

Let's consider, point three, how the cross produces our total sanctification; in every Christian, every single Christian, there is a deep hatred of indwelling sin. Every Christian hates sin. Maybe we don't see sin as we should, but every Christian, once they see sin, they hate it.

There's a passion and desire to realize holiness in the life as a present and abiding reality, and any professing

Christian who makes no effort to mortify his sin, no, makes no effort at exposing sin, seeing it, identifying it, getting rid of it, any Christian who makes no effort to discipline himself for the purpose of godliness, I'd say it's reasonable to question whether that person is a Christian at all.

But every true Christian, he knows his own sin. He knows his lusts, he knows his selfish ambition, his pride, his greed, his jealousy, envy, bitter complaining, lack of gratitude. Whatever it is, every true Christian wants that sin gone, wants that sin dead, wants it fully mortified.

There are some I know who seem blithely unaware of indwelling sin, who seem unaffected or unconcerned with the continuance of sin in their lives, and perhaps they've deceived themselves into thinking silly thoughts, like, "Because my sin isn't of this nature or that nature, I'm better off than others. I'm not like that guy. I'm not like that lady there. I mean, look how she talks, how she gossips. I don't do that."

Those who compare themselves with other people and excuse themselves and pay no attention to the sin in their heart, those

are the most immature and self-deceived of all. Let no one regard them. True Christians cultivate a sensitive conscience toward God. True Christians try to hunt down every sin that they can find in their hearts and kill it, giving sin no quarter, showing sin no mercy, making no excuses. They desire to please God. They're eager to look for sin in their lives, find it, mortify it, work the good work of repentance to their eternal joy and God's glory.

Let me just give you two directions, here, one for mortification; that is, mortification's a big word, means kill sin, kill it, mortify it. One direction for mortifying sin and one direction for sanctification, for growing in holiness. So it's a negative direction and a positive direction; one for putting off sin, another for putting on righteousness.

First direction for mortifying your sin, for putting off sin: Look to the cross to reflect on God's view of your sin. Meditate on his wrath over your sin, which he punished in the cross and took away the penalty for you. But if there is indwelling sin in your life, believe me, beloved, he hates it. Still, his attitude toward your sin, even if it continues now,

post-your conversion, he still hates it. Get on his side about it. Help your conscience be informed about it. Reflect on God's view of your sin.

Don't make the same mistake Israel did, which Jeremiah confronted in Jeremiah 6:14, also Jeremiah 8:11. "They have healed the wound of my people slightly," or lightly, "saying 'Peace, peace, when there is no peace.'" Don't do that to yourself. People who do that would avoid the discomfort of thinking about their guilt. They would run too quickly to make fig leaves to hide their shame, and in so doing, they fail to benefit from the blood atonement of the cross. It's the only way to remove guilt and shame.

You need to think deeply enough about your sin, beloved, so that you can load your conscience with the guilt of your sin. Load it up. Start by informing your conscience of the law of God, so that when you do sin, you drag that evil thing before the bar of divine law, examine it in the sterile light of divine righteousness, and teach your soul to hate it just as God does.

John Owen writes this, he says, "Bring the holy Law of God into thy conscience. Lay thy corruption to it. Pray that thou mayst be affected with it. Consider the holiness, spirituality, fiery severity, inwardness, absoluteness of the law, and see how thou can't stand before it. Be much, I say, in affecting thy conscience with the terror of the Lord and the law. How righteous it is that every one of thy transgressions should receive a recompense of reward."

After you look to the law, see what your sins deserve, to inform your conscience about the guilt and penalty of your sins, then look to the cross. Only then look to the cross to see what your sins actually caused, to see what Christ actually suffered. Think, beloved, what God could have done to you but did not, how he stayed his hand against you and your sins and turned his hand against his beloved Son.

Again Owen writes this, he says, "Consider what action God might have taken against thee, to have made thee a shame and a reproach in this world, and an object of wrath forever; how thou hast dealt treacherously and falsely with him, flattered him with thy lips, but broken all promises and engagements, and

that, by the means of that sin thou art now in pursuit of; and yet he has spared thee from time to time although thou seemest boldly to have put it to the trial how long could he hold out. And wilt thou yet sin against him? Wilt thou yet weary him, and make him to serve thee with thy corruptions?" Let's use Paul's language: "May it never be!" Think what God could have done to you, beloved, but didn't.

And then consider Christ and his Gospel, his cross. Owen again says this: "Look on him whom thou has pierced with thy sin, and be in bitterness. Say to thy soul, 'What have I done? What love, what mercy, what blood, what grace have I despised and trampled on? Is this the return I make to the Father for his love, to the Son for his blood, to the Holy Ghost for his grace? Do I thus requite the Lord? Have I defiled the heart that Christ died to wash, that the blessed Spirit have chosen to dwell in, and can I keep myself out of the dust? What can I say to the dear Lord Jesus? How shall I hold my, up my head with any boldness before him? Do I account communion with him of so little value, that for this vile lust's sake I have scarce left him any room in my heart? How shall I escape if I neglect so great a salvation?'

"In the meantime, what shall I say to the Lord? Love, mercy, grace, goodness, peace, joy, consolation: I have despised them all, esteemed them as a thing of naught that I might harbor a lust in my heart. If I obtained a view of God's fatherly countenance, that I might behold his face, and provoke him to his face, was my soul washed that room might be made for new defilements? Shall I endeavor to disappoint the end of death, of the death of Christ? Shall I daily grieve that Spirit whereby I am sealed to the day of redemption?"

I'll stop there. But that's John Owen. So it goes with him, speaking to us from a distant Puritan land, calling out to us who live in a very self-indulgent time, telling us to make no provision for the flesh so that we may mortify every sin, every lust. Owen again advises us, he says, "Entertain thy conscience daily with this entreaty. See if it can stand before this aggravation of its guilt. If this make thy conscience not sink in some measure and melt, I fear their, thy case is dangerous."

True, if your conscience is hardened against you, loading your conscience with guilt from the Word of God about what God thinks about your sin, about what it cost Christ and the cross,

your situation is grave, my friend. He says, "While the conscience hath any means to alleviate the guilt of sin, the soul will never vigorously attempt its mortification." That is true. You want to be after your sin? You want to go after it with extreme prejudice? You must understand your sin the way God does.

So that's one direction for mortifying sin: load the conscience with the knowledge of the law of God. Your sin's a violation of the law of God. Christ's suffering for your sin: Load your conscience with it and face the truth about your sin.

Here's a second direction, and this is for sanctification. Here's a positive direction so that you grow in holiness, so that you put on righteousness. Look to the cross and reflect on Christ's full atonement, which purchased your full pardon, and just reflect on what that means. What does that mean? This is the abiding power of the cross to encourage you toward sanctification, so that you do not grow weary in doing good. Don't skip, of course, the vital step of informing your conscience, because if you do, you'll commit the same error, saying, "Peace, peace," to your soul when there is no peace.

That mistake is going to cause you to miss out on the true grace that God gives to a humble and contrite soul.

Once you do load your conscience, now look to your sanctification. Reflect on Christ's mercy toward you. Think about what his mercy in the cross of him voluntarily taking your sins upon himself and dying, that full wrath of God. Think about what that means. Think about his intention to deliver you from your sins. Consider his faithfulness in everything that God sent him to do. See how the total sufficiency of his atonement on the cross answers the justice that God demands in his law, how it satisfied the just wrath for your sins.

Consider, as we said, how the cross purchases our full salvation. If you've settled your mind on the sufficiency of Christ's atonement, his cross, if you know the cross can set you free from sin, grow you in sanctification, then inform your mind, assure your heart that it is his desire to free you from your sin, to sanctify you.

I say this to people all the time in the counseling office, people struggling with sin, people feeling like repenting of any

particular sin and pursuing righteousness. It's like being asked to climb Mount Everest with no arms and no legs. They think, "Okay, I can pull myself along with my teeth, get up that mountain," and I say, "Nope, you don't have any teeth, either."

You need to understand: God wants your sanctification more than you do, and even in times when you don't feel it, when you don't sense the need to mortify sin and grow in holiness, God knows his own, and he will bring you to holiness. It is his desire to free you from sin. That's why the cross. So expect it. And from that expectation of faith, expect help from Christ to overcome your sin and grow in holiness.

Let me give you two reasons to expect, expect his help and sanctification because he calls you to abide in him. He wants to be there with you. He wants and intends to join us in our fruit-bearing, in our growing holiness. He wants to be the efficient cause of our fruit-bearing.

We've read this in John 15:4,7, and 8. "Abide in me, I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. If you

abide in me, why, my words abide in you. Ask whatever you wish, it'll be done for you. By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples." That's what he wants. Your abiding. Expect his help in your sanctification because he wants you to abide in him. He will abide in you. He will have you to abide in him.

Secondly, expect his help in your sanctification because God has made Christ your High Priest. Hebrews 2:17: "He had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. Because he himself has suffered when tempted, he's able to help those who are being tempted."

When you hear "he's able," think "he desires to. He wants to. He delights in helping me." His high-priestly service is the great reward for his obedience in service to God. So we come to him, encouraged to do so in Hebrews 4:15: "We don't have a high priest who's unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, and yet without sin. And so let us then, with confidence draw near to the throne

of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Listen, Jesus came to seek and save the lost. He came for you. He came to make you holy. He came to bear your sins in his body, on the cross, that you might enjoy the life of God in him. And what he set out to do, he most certainly will accomplish. So expect that, beloved. Pray for that. Work for that. Take heart because he will certainly do what he set out to do. His cross punishes our sinful condition. It purchases our full salvation. And his cross produces our total sanctification.

I want you to be thinking about these things that we've talked about; I realize there's a lot there. So there's plenty for you to draw from in your reflection and meditation and prayer as we come to consider the meaning of the Lord's table.

Our Father, we thank you for your great plan of redemption. We thank you for the perfect work of Christ on the cross. We thank you, Lord Jesus, for your willingness to take up the Father's command, that you would bear the sins of your people, that we might be reconciled to God. And we do pray as we partake

of these elements, the bread and the cup, we pray that you would minister to us in this time, through this table, that our participation in the table would be a participation in the body and the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray that you, by your Holy Spirit, would stir us up, that we would mortify all sin and pursue holiness in the fear of God, that we might experience joy and glory, the truth and light, the peace and purity, that we would be your sanctified, blood-washed people, zealous for good works. We love you, and we thank you for this time we have together and ask that you would bless it and use it for our sanctification. It's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.