

Once and For All
Hebrews 10:11-18

When I was about eight years old, my mother took my brothers and me to someone's house for a women's meeting. All the women had children about our age. The woman who hosted the meeting had a boy who was a year or two older than us. This boy had a wealth of toys and playground equipment in his backyard. He even had a wooden fort built by his father. We got to talking about what we would play. He suggested that we play cowboys and Indians. He would be the Indian attacking the fort, and we would be the soldiers in the fort. That sounded like fun. We all crowded into the fort, and he went to his room and got his bow and arrows. The problem was that they were real bow and arrows. He came back and shot his arrows through the windows at us. He told us to keep our heads down. But one little guy named Billy didn't understand why that was important. He raised up, and an arrow hit him in the side of the head. It wasn't a life threatening wound, but it looked terrible. He bled profusely. The boy with the bow and arrow suddenly realized what a dangerous and foolish game this was. Someone ran into the house screaming that Billy had been shot. The mothers all came running out. Billy's mother took him to the emergency room. The other mothers were all checking their children. And, of course, the host mother was absolutely mortified. The boy with the bow and arrows was sobbing. He went back to his room and broke his bow and arrows into little pieces.

Why did he do that? What good did breaking his bow and arrows do?

Well, we know. From a logical stand point smashing his bow and arrows makes no sense at all. But we know why he did it. Deep within the human psyche there is a rule. It guides us at the deepest levels of our souls. Even children know this rule. The rule is this: When someone does something bad, a price has to be paid. There's got to be punishment.

This boy knew that what he had done was bad. It was very bad. So, he did penance. He punished himself by destroying his beloved bow and arrows. He paid for his transgression by destroying something he loved.

This need to pay for our transgressions is very powerful. It is included in most religions. Most religions provide ways for us to punish ourselves when we do wrong. In the Old Testament the provision for punishment was the sacrifices. When you broke one of the laws, you paid for it by sacrificing one of your most prized possessions, one of your livestock. That was your punishment. There was no need to punish yourself any further. Your debt had been paid.

The problem was that sacrifice only paid for that particular sin. If you sinned again, you would have to bring another sacrifice. If we understand what true righteousness is, we are aware that we sin on a daily basis. The point that Jesus is making in the Sermon on the Mount is the everyday sins we commit are terrible. You think it's terrible to commit murder? It's just as bad to be angry with someone. You think it's terrible to commit adultery? You are committing adultery when you look at someone lustfully. When you fail to love your enemies, you have done something terrible. When you love money and wealth, you have done something terrible.

What's so terrible about these things? The accumulation of all these "everyday" sins have a devastating impact on humanity. These are the sins which have resulted in the war,

poverty and desolation which throughout history to this very day have led the human race to inflict misery, suffering and death upon each other.

We simply do not have enough precious possessions to pay the price for all the terrible things we do day by day. Trying to pay the price for our sins is like trying to bail out a boat when it has already sunk.

We are all sinners. We know that. But what you may not know is that there are three kinds of sinners:

First, there are the happy sinners. These are people who don't know what true righteousness is. They think that they are basically pretty good people. Every now and then they do something really bad. When they do, they find a way to pay the price. They sacrifice something. They punish themselves in some way. Then they feel good about themselves and they can get back to business as usual. They never stop to think that business as usual is what led to the misery afflicting so many people in our families, our communities, and the world—a world in which millions of people a day die from violence and the effects of poverty. They don't know how terrible their sins are, and they don't want to know.

Then there are miserable sinners. These are people who look at themselves honestly and recognize the things they have done and are doing which are just plain wrong. And they spend each day beating themselves up in order to pay the price for their wrong doing. They punish themselves constantly to pay for their sins. It doesn't make anything better. But it does fulfill their need to satisfy the rule that when we do something terrible, we have to pay a price.

Finally, there are the forgiven sinners. They are the ones who recognize their sinfulness and also recognize that they can't possibly pay the price of their sins and that they don't have to. The price has been paid. Christ has paid it once and for all. We are sinners. We sin constantly. We fall far short of true righteousness. But we don't have to go around beating ourselves with whips and telling ourselves what terrible people we are in order to pay the price for our sins. That's all been taken care of. Christ has paid our debt in full once and for all.

Because our debt has been paid, forgiven sinners are freed to become saints. They can say, "Okay, now that I don't have to spend all my time and energy trying to pay the price for my sins, I can concentrate on changing my ways. How can I live in such a way that I can make life better for the people in my family, for the people in my church and my community, for the people on the other side of the world?"

Christ has freed us from the guilt which weighs us down. We are like hot air balloons. We were created to soar to the heights of righteousness and love. But guilt is a weight that holds us down. By paying the price for our sins Christ has thrown off those bags of sand. We are free to fly.

Some of the greatest people in history were once weighed down by guilt. Paul was so excited by the good news of salvation by faith because he had been weighed down by guilt. He had tried to live up to all the Law's requirements, and he knew it was impossible. He would not allow himself to be a happy sinner by saying, "Well, I may not be able to obey all the laws perfectly, but I do better than most." No, Paul said, "To break one of the laws is to break them all." You were either law-abiding or you were a law-breaker. Paul persecuted the church as a way of paying for his failure to keep all the laws. He was filled with guilt. What a relief it was for him to know that Christ has paid his debt once and for all. It freed him to become the greatest evangelist in the history of the Church.

Martin Luther was weighed down by guilt. Most Catholics go to confession once a week at most and are given tasks to do as penance or punishment for their sins. Martin Luther was so

sensitive to his sins that he went to confession daily. The priests ran out of ideas for his penance. And he still felt guilty—until he rediscovered what Paul had learned, that Christ has paid our debt in full. He was freed to challenge the Catholic Church’s use of guilt to control its members, and the result was the Protestant Reformation.

John Wesley was weighed down by guilt. He spent hours in fasting and prayer to pay his debts. He came to America as a missionary in hopes that that great sacrifice would pay his debts. Nothing he did worked—until he relearned the message of Paul and Luther that Christ has paid out debt once and for all. Wesley was free to lead the Methodist movement that transformed England and the world.

Are you a happy sinner? Are you a miserable sinner? Are you a forgiven sinner? Christ has paid your debt once and for all. Be free to become the saint you were created to be.

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