

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Taking Away Our Sins

Leviticus 16:1-22; Hebrews 10:19-25

The comedian Cathy Ladman expresses a view that many people probably share. She says, "All religions are the same: religion is basically guilt with different holidays."¹

When it comes to the subjects of guilt and religious holidays, no date or time is more important on the Christian calendar than this day and the week ahead. This is Palm Sunday. It commemorates Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and begins a series of observances focusing on the events of Holy Week. It's also sometimes called Passion Sunday, because it marks the beginning of the passion or suffering of Jesus leading to and including his crucifixion. Though Jesus' suffering and death are always part of the gospel that we preach and practice, they move even more front and center this time of the year.

Between now and next Sunday, there will be no shortage of religious observances. In churches near and far, big and small, there will be plenty of ceremony, ritual, and remembrance. Through acts of congregational worship, and in individual moments of personal devotion, believers will recall and reflect on the central events of our faith. And for many of us, the subject and experience of guilt won't be far away.

That's because the cross and human guilt are inseparable. Guilt is how we describe our responsibility for an attitude or action that offends against what is right according to the will of God. Sometimes we speak of guilt in the more objective, legal sense, as the opposite of innocence. Sometimes we focus more on feelings of guilt that we experience because of thoughts and actions that violate God's law and purpose. These feelings often have to do with a sense of self-condemnation or the condemnation of another person. The concept of sin also comes into play here, especially when the sense of responsibility we feel is toward God. In fact, guilt, as an accountability to God, is inseparable from, and sometimes virtually synonymous with, sin.

Researchers at the University of Toronto once published data suggesting that people experience a "powerful urge to wash themselves" when suffering from a guilty conscience. They describe this urge as the "Macbeth effect." Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's famous plays in which one of the major characters cries, "Out, damned spot!" while trying to scrub away bloodstains that exist only in her mind. In the study, researchers asked volunteers to think about immoral acts they had committed in the past. The volunteers were then offered an opportunity to clean their hands. Those who had retraced their sins "jumped at the offer at twice the rate of study subjects who had not imagined past transgressions."²

We can never scream, "Out, damned spot!" or wash our hands enough to remove the guilt of our sins. But God, in his mercy and forgiveness, is so determined to free us from bondage to our iniquities, and to remove the sin that separates us from him and from one another, that he provides for our purification and cleansing. In today's Scripture passage from Leviticus, the writer describes the ceremonies associated with the Day of Atonement, sometimes referred to as "the Good Friday of the Old Testament."³ The aim of these sacrifices and rituals was to purify both the sanctuary and the people. As for the people, their cleansing involved two goats. One was sacrificed as a sin offering (vv. 15-19), and the other took the people's iniquities away (vv. 20-22). This is how we get the concept of the

scapegoat. Aaron, the high priest, is instructed to lay his hands upon the goat and confess over it all the rebellion and wickedness of the people. All their sins are to be put on the goat's head. Then the goat is to be sent away into the wilderness, a visual sign of how the people's sins are carried away, never to return. This ritual, combined with the blood sacrifice and the burning of the animal carcasses, demonstrate how God has dealt with the sins of his people, and sanctified the people for his purposes.

Since 2006, people have gathered in Times Square for a New Year event called Good Riddance Day. Participants write down unpleasant, painful, or embarrassing memories from the past year and throw them into an industrial strength shredder. They also have the option of taking a sledge hammer and smashing a good riddance item, such as a cell phone. The event is designed after a Latin American tradition in which New Year's revelers stuff dolls with objects representing bad memories before setting them on fire. One of the Good Riddance Day organizers said, "It really is this need we have, even when the world is crazy, to say, 'You know what? I'm gonna let go of the things that have been dragging me down and going to look forward with a sense of hope and the possibility of change. Either for myself personally or for the world.' So this is a chance to detox in a big way."⁴

Though "Good Riddance Day" doesn't rise to the level of the Day of Atonement," it does point to our need to face our past and find hope for the future. And facing our past often involves dealing with the guilt we feel about our lives and our behavior. Deeds from our past that still haunt us. Things we have done that we shouldn't have. Things we should have done but didn't. Times when we have harmed others, damaging and perhaps even destroying relationships. Opportunities for reconciliation that we ignored or refused. Ways that we have neglected others in need or not spoken up or taken action when injustice was having its way. Mistakes and failures that we wish we could go back and fix.

National Public Radio did a report based on an interview with Robert Ebeling. Ebeling was one of the engineers who worked on the 1986 Space Shuttle *Challenger* launch that resulted in the death of all seven crew members. In January of that year, Ebeling and four other engineers pleaded for the launch to be delayed, because they anticipated the precise failure that would eventually destroy the shuttle. But their pleas were refused. Three weeks after the explosion, Ebeling and another engineer, since deceased, spoke to NPR. But Ebeling himself wasn't identified by name until 30 years later. Last year's NPR broadcast said:

Ebeling retired soon after *Challenger*. He suffered deep depression and has never been able to lift the burden of guilt. In 1986, as he watched that haunting image again on a television screen, he said, "I could have done more. I should have done more." He says the same thing today, sitting in a big easy chair in the same living room, his eyes watery and his face grave. The data he and his fellow engineers presented, and their persistent and sometimes angry arguments, weren't enough to sway Thiokol managers and NASA officials. Ebeling concludes he was inadequate. He didn't argue the data well enough. A religious man, this is something he has prayed about for the past 30 years. "I think that was one of the mistakes that God made," Ebeling says softly. "He shouldn't have picked me for the job. But the next time I talk to him, I'm gonna ask him, 'Why me. You picked a loser.'"⁵

Feelings of guilt and regret can linger and loom and load us down over time, becoming an enormous weight, a psychological, emotional, and spiritual burden that bears down on you, body and soul, crushing hope and squashing any possibility of a future that's different from the past.

Not that we shouldn't experience feelings of guilt about the ways that we have disobeyed God and failed to love him and our neighbor. In fact, a sense of guilt shows that we recognize our accountability to God and to one another. It demonstrates our awareness that something is wrong, and that we have done something to contribute to that wrongness in our lives and in God's world. In the television series *True Detective*, Louisiana State

homicide detective Rust Cohle, played by Matthew McConaughey, observes that his ability to elicit confessions from almost anyone is rooted in his philosophy about human nature. He says, "Look—everybody knows there's something wrong with them. They just don't know what it is. Everybody wants confession; everybody wants some cathartic narrative for it. The guilty especially. And everybody's guilty."⁶

What can be done about our guilty state before God? The good news is that what needs to be done has been done, by God, through the death of Jesus Christ. As we take the first steps into Holy Week and our remembrance of Jesus' suffering and crucifixion, we remember the mercy and forgiveness of the God who provided for his people's purification on the Day of Atonement. Together, the goat sacrificed and the living scapegoat showed that God had dealt with the reality of his people's sins, that those sins were taken away, and that the load of guilt was removed.

This same God who was working to forgive and make new on the Day of Atonement was present in saving power in the death of Jesus, opening the way for us to be able to come into his presence. So as today's Scripture passage from Hebrews reminds us, "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water" (v. 22). We human sinners don't need to live in a state of perpetual guilt, but rather with a deep, inner assurance of God's forgiveness and acceptance. That doesn't mean that freedom from guilt will be an instantaneous, painless experience. But it does mean living forward, with growing daily confidence that God's faithfulness to his promises is greater than the death-dealing power of our sins.

Gregg Allman, the lead singer for the Allman Brothers Band, wrote a memoir titled *My Cross to Bear*. In the book, he describes how, for most of their lives, he and his brother Duane were good friends. But that all unraveled in 1971 when the two had a nasty argument. Gregg had given Duane money to buy drugs. But when Duane failed to deliver them, Gregg stormed into his brother's house, stole the drugs, and then lied to his brother about it. Shortly after their quarrel, Duane died in a motorcycle accident. To this day, Gregg can't forget the incident or find forgiveness. He said, "The last thing I ever said to my brother was a lie. . . . I have thought of that lie every day of my life, and I just keep recrucifying myself for it. I know that's not what he would want—well, not for long anyway. . . . But the thing is, I never got the chance to tell him the truth."⁷

As you consider your own history of sin, remember that you need not spend your life bearing the cross of guilt, continually recrucifying yourself over your past. Jesus Christ has already carried that cross. He died for us, in our place, bearing the weight of our sin and guilt. He took upon himself God's wrath toward our rebellion and disobedience. Jesus became a substitute for us, so that your sins could be dealt with and removed. Because of God's compassionate presence and saving power in the cross, your sins have been taken away. And by faith, you can say, with the words of Charles Wesley's great old hymn, "My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee."

¹ Quoted in Philip Yancey, *Vanishing Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) 21.

² "Washing Your Hands of Guilt." *The Week* (September 29, 2006) 21.

³ Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death: Sermons for Holy Week and Easter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 113.

⁴ Erin Clark, "Bad 2016 Memories Smashed at Times Square 'Good Riddance Day.'" Warner Cable News (December 28, 2016).

⁵ Howard Berkes, "30 Years After Explosion, Challenger Engineer Still Blames Himself," NPR The Two-Way blog (January 28, 2016).

⁶ Quoted in James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016) 105.

⁷ Gregg Allman, *My Cross to Bear* (New York: William Morrow, 2012) 192-93.