

Words on the Wall: He Became Sin For Us

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Let's start this morning by talking about the war on guilt. For at least 150 years there have been a lot of people who have been trying to remove guilt from our society, and who can blame them. Guilt is an awful feeling. The embarrassment, the sense of failure, the sense that you have caused harm, the sense of indebtedness. Guilt is a dark cloud that follows you around and presses down on you. I speak from personal experience. Three weeks ago I got a brand new computer. The church bought it for me. It was a Microsoft Surface. I really liked it - small and light and portable and fast! You can write on the screen and it will automatically save your notes. I was so pleased. But then on Thursday, October 19, a day that will live in infamy, I was coming to church after a morning meeting and I was walking through the church parking lot. I was already a little stressed because of all the things going on, when there was a clatter behind me. A sharp smack. I turned around and there, on the ground was my brand new computer, smashed. I'd forgotten to zip up the side zipper on my carrying case, it had fallen out and now it was broken. I cried out in anguish; I jumped up and down. I was so mad I spiked my car keys on my computer bag. Fortunately only God saw me do this...well...God and Barb Noordelos. In any case I felt miserable for days afterwards. I was so mad at myself, mad at my carelessness leaving the zipper open, mad at myself for spiking my keys in the middle of the church parking lot, mad at myself for destroying this 1000 dollar piece of equipment, mad myself for being so mad at myself... you know the drill. We all know the drill. That's what guilt feels like: it's this combination of sorrow and indebtedness and frustration and anger, and it mixes together to form that dark cloud that follows us around and presses down on us. And that cloud can get really dark and really heavy. We can laugh about a computer dropped in a church parking lot, but when our sins hurt people...when it's people who get smashed because of our carelessness, our neglect, our selfishness, our pitiful weakness...well... then we don't laugh, we stoop, we groan. Then we're not just dealing with a cloud that makes us feel bad for a weekend, we're dealing with a weather system that settles in over the whole arc of our life and doesn't move.

Because Guilt is so miserable, a lot of folks have worked pretty hard to get rid of it. And they've been trying to get rid of guilt by getting rid of God. They say, "Guilt is a neurosis produced in us by religion! We send our children to church and the church teaches them all these rules and tells them that if they break these rules it's a sin, and when you sin God is angry with you! They even talk about this terrible place called hell. So these poor little kids walk around in fear and guilt! It's just a way to control people! Get rid of God and all these silly rules and our consciences won't beat us up anymore, we won't feel guilty! Lots of people say stuff like this, but the father of this thought might be the German philosopher Frederich Nietzsche. Nietzsche famously said, "God is dead." He then went on to say, in another place, "Sin is dead and we have killed it!" He was sure that once we let go of these superstitious notions of God and sin we also see "a decline in the consciousness of human debt," "a release...from this whole feeling of being indebted." Without God and sin, there will be no guilt, or so he thought. But a funny thing happened. I think it's fair to say that in modern Western society belief in God has faded, and consciousness of sin has faded with it, but guilt has not gone away; if anything guilt has gotten stronger. This spring a really great article was published in a magazine called the Hedgehog Review. The article was called "The Strange Persistence of Guilt". In it, the author, Wilfred

McClay, argues that one of the biggest problems faced in our society today is an accumulation of unresolved guilt. When we pushed God and the church out of our lives, we didn't get rid of guilt, we just got rid of our ability to deal with it. Guilt hasn't gone anywhere. People still walk around feeling like they've messed up, feeling like they've fallen short, and feeling like they're a failure. Just look at modern music, modern novels, modern movies, modern art – they are full of dark clouds. They are full of a sense that something is terribly wrong. The guilt is still there. In fact, if anything it's worse. It's worse because in the age of digital communication we don't just feel guilty about the sins in my neighborhood; now I can watch TV and see children dying of famine and young girls caught up in the prostitution trade and innocent refugees caught up in wars, I can see all these people suffering horribly; meanwhile I complain when we run out of cabernet and I have to drink merlot. So the clouds of guilt get thicker and heavier and we don't know what to do. Our sins and failures cry louder than ever but we've forgotten where to go with them. We feel this enormous sense of growing debt, but we have no means to pay it. And as guilt builds up in us and in the society around us it becomes more than a dark cloud; it becomes a hurricane of sadness, outrage, regret, scapegoating, finger-pointing and despair.

As a kind of case study, consider the life of Kurt Cobain. Kurt Cobain was the front man for the legendary rock and roll band Nirvana. Nirvana was part of the grunge rock movement that came out of Seattle in the 90's and grunge rock was very much an anti-establishment thing. Like all rock and roll, it wasn't about rules and conventions; it was about sticking it to the man. In April of 1994, Kurt Cobain took his own life. He left a suicide note for his wife and his infant daughter. In that note he acknowledges the good things in life – his love for his daughter and his love for his wife – but he also says that the clouds had just gotten too heavy for him, and by his own account, a big part of that dark weight was guilt. "I feel guilty beyond words for faking my way through life," he says. "I can't get over the frustration, the guilt, the empathy I have for everyone." The letter oozes the sense that he is letting everybody down and can't take it anymore. He's caught in this guilt storm and he doesn't know what to do. Suicide is a complex behavior and it never boils down to one thing, but Kurt Cobain's inability to handle guilt is clearly part of the picture. Guilt builds in a person, builds in a society, until it becomes a hurricane, and all we can see is the storm, and all we can feel is our failure.

Jesus came to this earth to still this storm. That is Paul's momentous proclamation in verse 21: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus comes to calm the storm of sin and guilt and he does it in three stages. First, he enters the storm. Armed with nothing but human flesh, he marches into the teeth of the gale. Just about every kind of terrible thing we human beings can do to each other, Jesus faces it in his life. As soon as he's born, he's faces Herod's terrible ambition. Before he's two, he's seen genocide – the Roman soldiers slaughtering the children of Bethlehem. He lives as a refugee in Egypt. In his ministry he is swarmed by the sick and the desperate, they literally paw at him and cry out his name as he passes by in the street. The demons shout at him. He walks through a constant storm of envy from rival church leaders, he endures prejudice, hostility, anger, and loss but he doesn't turn back; he sets his face, he sets his face toward Jerusalem and walks toward the center of the storm. And when he gets to the center of the storm the wind really starts to howl: hatred, mockery, torture, outrage, betrayal, denial, abandonment, torture. It all comes crashing on him in wave after wave until he is left hanging naked and bleeding from the cross, heaving out his last breaths. Paul uses an unusual phrase to describe Jesus' entry into the storm. He says "he became sin for us." Why does Paul use that phrase? If someone is really, really in pain, instead of saying, "I am in pain, or I feel pain, they might say "I am pain." It's a kind of vivid way expressing how deeply immersed you've become in something. There at the

center of the storm, hanging on the cross. Jesus has become sin, he has become guilt, and he's done it for us.

The second thing Jesus does is he calms the storm by taking the debt of guilt and sin into himself. He doesn't just face the anger and the envy and the pride; he absorbs it. With as loud cry he opens up his arms and he takes it all in: all the drunken anger of an abusive parent and all the naked fear of the child they beat; all violence of ambitious men and all the anguish of the mothers bent over the bodies of their children lying in the street; all the small, petty, selfish things that you have done and that I have done – he takes them into himself and with a wail and cries out 'It is finished!' This is the part of Jesus' work that the catechism describes in the questions and answers we read earlier. The debt of sin is a human debt, so Jesus becomes a human and enters into our misery. The size of the guilt, the size of this storm is too big for any human being to handle, so our savior is also God so that he could pay the debt, absorb the guilt, calm the storm.

There's one more step that Jesus takes in taking care of guilt. He doesn't just give us a way to take the guilt out of our lives, he plants something new in its place. He plants the Holy Spirit in our hearts so that we aren't just the same old people with the guilt washed out of us; we are new creations. The old is gone and the new is here. We may look like regular people on the outside, and we admit that quite a bit of our old self still clings to us, but we don't look at each other from an earthly point of view, because we are in Christ. His life is flowing into us. The Spirit of God is in our heart and we are being changed - prayer by prayer, confession by confession, song by song, sermon by sermon the gunk is being cleaned away, and we are becoming the righteousness of God. The storm is lifting; the light is coming through.

All this makes me think of Walter Wangerin's parable of the Ragman. It tells the story of a strong young man who was seen walking through the most broken down streets of a town pulling a cart that was covered with clean new rags. As he walked, the young man called out, "Rags! Rags! Exchange your rags here! New Rags for old! I will trade your new rags for old." He was a radiant figure in that place full of dirty streets and broken people. Everywhere he went he traded rags with people. He came across a woman weeping into her rag because she had lost her child. He took her saturated cloth from her and gave him one of his clean ones and the most remarkable thing happened: when she took his cloth her tears stopped and a light came to her face, and when the Ragman put her cloth in his pocket he began to weep; he began to weep like someone who'd lost a child. This pattern went on all through the streets of the city. He met a man with an abscess on his leg; he took the man's stinking bandage and wrapped it around his own leg and gave the man a new white rag. The man's leg was clean and now the rag man was limping with blood seeping through his cloth. He met a woman with a deformed spine, stooped and hunched with age, he gave her a rag and took her shawl, draping it around his own shoulders. When he walked away he was hunched and she stood tall and strong. He did this all over the city, person by broken person, until the whole city was clothed in white, and when he was done the Ragman, now broken, hobbling and covered in blood and sweat, hobbled up to the top of a hill just outside the city where he died. "God made him who had no sin, to be sin for us....so that we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus comes into the middle of the storm of your guilt and your fear and he's here to take that all on himself, so for heaven's sake....give him your rag.

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