

St. Augustine's

Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

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ASH WEDNESDAY

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Div I - The Sin Problem

PR. All mankind has sinned and is therefore separated from God

Div. II - Gods' answer to the problem of sin

PR. Atonement requires the shedding of blood.

Div. III - Maintaining our relationship with God

PR. We draw near to God by self examination, penitence, prayer, and by reading and meditating on the Word of God.

Div. I - **The Sin Problem**

We live in an age where sin is downplayed and trivialized. Everyone does it - no big deal! The Revisionists say there is no sin, therefore there was no need for Christ to die. Some even go so far as to claim it was all just a myth, it never really happened. Billboards on buses pronounce: "There is probably no God, so stop worrying and enjoy your life." Another says: "Why believe in God? Just be good for goodness sake!"

We idolize the lives of the rich and glamorous bowing before false Gods one day and make a pretence of being faithful disciples of God the next. At the heart of all sin is a desire to be independent, to set ones' own rules. It is to be answerable to no one. Like the song made famous by Frank Sinatra, "I'll Do It My Way" - it is an act of deliberate disobedience and rebellion against God.

On this day, as we begin our journey to Easter, God reminds us, with the ancient sign of ashes, of the frailty and uncertainty of human life. The wages of sin is death. A life of independence and self-sufficiency is a life without God and creates a barrier between God and his people and judgement enters in.

If that were the end of the story there would be no hope for mankind. The underlying question of Ash Wednesday is: How can a Holy God live in the midst of a sinful people?

In the book "The Shack", the author states:

"God does not desire sin to devour us from the inside out but rather to set us free from sin so it no longer has power over our lives, driving a wedge between God and ourselves. . . . His purposes are always an expression of his love. His purposes are always to work life out of death, to bring freedom out of brokenness and to turn darkness into light"

Our Holy, eternally sinless God desires a relationship with sinful mankind. It is the nature of his love. To open the way to relationship to all who hear and respond to his invitation of salvation.

Ex. 34.5-7 records Gods' response to Moses' prayer to God to teach him his ways so he might know him. God responds by saying:

"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God is slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."

The Collect for today echoes these words:

"The Almighty God, hatest nothing he has made and forgives all who are penitent and worthily lament of their sins."

Gods' nature is unchanging. He is the same yesterday, today and forever.

All mankind has sinned and is therefore separated from God. From the beginning God has been faced with the dilemma of how He, the Almighty, Holy God who is eternally sinless can be in relationship with his chosen people who cannot go one hour without sinning.

God desires to live in the midst of his people. At the centre of their lives, but he cannot be in the presence of sin. If God had not made provision for the forgiveness of sin no one would survive.

Div II - God's answer to the problem of sin

For the Israelites God established a Day of Atonement. A day of fasting and self denial. A day of reflection and confession of their sins. A day on which atonement for their sins was made by the sacrifice of a bull (for the High Priest and his family) and a goat whose blood was sprinkled by the High Priest, behind the curtain, in the Holy of Holies, on the front of the Covenant Box, and on the Mercy Seat, (the lid to the Covenant Box). Then the High Priest laid the sins of the people on the head of a live goat who was taken out into the wilderness and released, away from the camp, removing their sins from the presence of God forever. When God looked down from the Cloud above the

Mercy Seat he saw the blood.

The atonement was in the sprinkling of blood and in the removal their sins away from the camp by the Scapegoat. The community had been cleansed of sin. Their debt had been paid. God remained in the midst of his people. This sacrificial ritual of atonement continued up to Christ's crucifixion on the cross outside the City Gates. His perfect sacrifice, once for all mankind perfectly fulfilled the Law and the requirements of atonement. His crucifixion outside the City gates fulfilled the role of the scapegoat. The sins of the whole world were nailed to Christ on the cross and forever removed from God's sight. When God looks down he sees the shed blood of Christ, the perfect atonement for our sins had been paid in full assuring us, that when we come in humility, repenting of our sins, we are forgiven and restored by our compassionate and merciful God into a relationship with him. His death on the cross was the price he paid for our sins.

Div. III - Maintaining our relationship with God

Today we no longer have a Day of Atonement for our sins, but on Ash Wednesday we are called to a day of fasting, of self examination and reflection upon our frailty and mortality as human beings, of repentance for our sins and the renewal of our relationship with God. He. 9.28 tells us that "Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people thereby accomplishing forever all that needed to be accomplished.

1Pe 1.18-19 says: "It is through the atoning blood of Christ that the believer receives redemption.

Eph 1.7 says "In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of Gods' grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."

Jesus did it all. There is nothing more to be accomplished. It is through Christ alone that we are saved.

Because of the abundance of Gods' grace we are invited to humble ourselves before God and submit ourselves to God without fear knowing that he desires not our death but that we should turn from our sins and draw near to God. On our own we are not able to live a life free of sin, but in Christ we are able to resist the devil and take a firm stand against evil.

Our attitude towards self and others is a reflection of our attitude toward God.

The call down through the centuries is to cleanse your hands and to purify your hearts. To set aside those things that dishonor God and our neighbor, our attitudes and actions towards God and others.

Mal. 3.7 - Every since the time of your forefathers you have turned from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me.

Ps. 24.4 - He who has a pure heart & clean hands does not lift up his soul to idols or swear by what is false.

Jer. 4.14 - Wash the evil from your heart and be saved. How long will you harbor wicked thoughts?

Ja. 4.11 - 12 "Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgement on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy. But you -- who are you to judge your neighbor? - NIV

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The Shack

When we are right with God he will move us into a deeper relationship with him. If we are to fellowship with and be useful in his service we must be pure in heart and in a right and trusting relationship with other Christians. Disharmony with God or with people makes spiritual victories impossible.

We are all called to serve the Lord. Being set aside for His service means setting aside the things that dishonor Him. What do you need to set aside for the Lord?

Separation from sin is an aspect of holiness. Consecration to God always results in blessings from him. When we cleanse our hands and purify our hearts God delights in drawing near to us. He desires to reveal his heart and his plans for us. Do we have time just to be in his presence treasuring the sacredness of the moment?

Of the generation of Israelites who were freed from bondage in Egypt, only Aaron, his sons Eleazar and Ishamar; Joshua and Caleb entered into the promised land. The others wandered in the wilderness of their disobedience and rebellion against God and forfeited the blessings God desired to give them.

How much time do you give to nurturing relationships with the significant others in your life? One hour? Every moment you can? What happens to those relationships you seldom have time for?

The Season of Lent is a wonderful opportunity to spend quality time not just leftover time with God each day. An opportunity to use the many tools we have to examine our lives in the light of God's great love for us and Christ's passion and death on the Cross. It is not meant as a time of sending us into morbid introspection but rather to draw us nearer to God.

When we cleanse our hands and purify our hearts God delights in drawing near to us. He desires to reveal his heart and his plans for us. To lift us up into His presence. Do we have time to just be in his presence, treasuring the moment?

Gerard W. Hughes, in his book, "Seven Weeks for the Soul" says:

"Life is a journey out of slavery into freedom, a journey made in hope."
For Christ who entered once into our humanity, our sinfulness, our suffering, and our death, is now out of time and therefore continually present in every moment of our time - 'Jesus is the same today as he was yesterday and as he will be forever.' (Heb. 13.8) We are on a journey to sharing his resurrection.

We celebrate Lent to make ourselves more aware of the nature of the journey we are taking and to give ourselves direction and hope." Lent begins by wearing ashes on our heads as a sign of repentance. A time of preparation for Easter."

"We are all sinners in need of repentance. Lent is a time for entering the mystery of Christ's Passover from death to resurrection and for imitating Christ in his forty days in the desert."

By self examination, penitence, prayer and the reading the Word of God we may enter more fully into this mystery.

The wages of sin is death. A life of independence and self-sufficiency is a life without God and creates a barrier between God and His people and judgement enters in.

Separation from sin is an aspect of holiness. Consecration to God always results in blessing. Ashes are a reminder of what will someday happen to all earthly life. But the death they signify is for Christians a beginning, the beginning of our eternal life with God.

