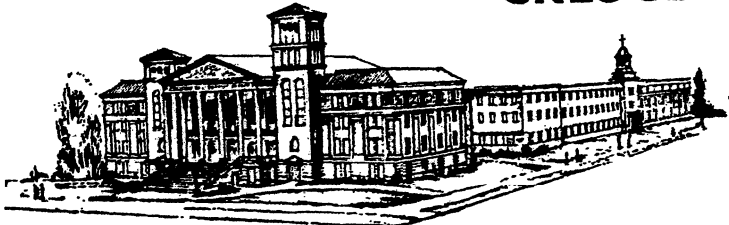


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE SAVING SECRET"



Sunday Morning, September 24, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: I John 1:5-9

A distinguished scientist of the last generation once said: "The higher man of today is no longer troubled about his sins." These words were quoted over and over again, and obviously reflected the thinking of many of his contemporaries. And quite frankly, as the words stand, I would not try to deny their truth for today. Our secular culture being what it is, "the-man-on-the-street" no longer thinks in terms of sin and guilt and the need for forgiveness. But do not let mere semantics confuse you; the terminology may have changed, but the basic condition to which the older words point is still the same. Modern man may not be troubled by his sins, but he certainly is troubled. The most characteristic word for our day is "anxiety"; we sing the song "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered" because this describes our times. And if you look to the bottom of this condition, it roots back to the same problem that our forefathers called "sin" and "guilt." It is man at war with himself. Whenever man clashes with his own ideals, whenever he violates his own sense of right and wrong, whenever he fails to live up to his inner feeling of "oughtness," then a condition is created with which he must deal. The terms "sin" and "guilt" may sound horribly out of date to modern ears, but we are quite familiar with the words "complex", "phobia", "depression" and "adjustment." And it is my contention that these words are really dealing with the selfsame dilemma. There is no greater need in our world today than to learn how to deal with our anxiety. And that is precisely my purpose this morning. Unashamedly using the older terminology, let me ask you a point blank question: "What do you do with your sins? When you violate your own sense of rightness, how do you handle the reality of guilt that is bound to ensue?"

It appears to me that only two approaches are open: either you try to handle the matter yourself - in your own resources, judgment, and strength; or you call in Help from beyond. The basic choice is "to go it alone" or to share it with Another. Let us examine these two approaches more carefully.

First there is the way of self-help. Actually this approach can assume a variety of forms, each different, but in its own way seeking to solve the dilemma within one's self. I can think of any number of endeavors. One is to deny categorically that guilt has any reality. Many people explain away the whole process as "a carry-over" from a more primitive stage. They disparage guilt as a characteristic of adolescent mentality, and look on it as a kind of superstition that reason must discard. This all has a sophisticated ring, but it does not stand up under rigorous analysis - for what is guilt after all? It is a response that is rooted in the realm of values. Because certain entities and actions are invested with meaning, we react as we do with a sense of guilt. To be sure, the value judgments may be in error, but the fact remains that guilt is real because some things are deemed to be significant. Therefore, to deny guilt is quite far-reaching, for it negates all of the meanings of life.

Sunday Morning, September 24, 1961

Perhaps an illustration will shed light. Let us say a man gets drunk and goes out to his car. His little son runs after him, and because of the father's condition he loses control of the car and runs over his son. Now recognize that the guilt he will experience is in direct proportion to the value of the child. If that father looked at the little corpse and said: "These feelings of guilt have no substance at all," what he is really saying is this: "That child and my relation to him mean nothing. To kill him is no different from patting him on the head. Nothing has any significance." And who of us would affirm such nihilism? We may do a lot of theorizing about the absence of values, but in terms of actual life we unconsciously affirm them. There is a difference in killing and not killing a child; and because a structure of transcendent value is deeply embedded within us, we shall always experience guilt when we violate it. This approach is a case of proving too much; to deny the reality of guilt is to deny the presence of meaning in life.

But if one cannot do away with guilt altogether, there is a second approach - disclaim any responsibility for it. This is particularly widespread today because of our preoccupation with psychology. In the inexorable forces of the subconscious and the traumatic experiences of childhood many have found an excuse for all their actions. They gladly confess that they are like leaves in the wind, propelled by forces over which they have no control. Because the neighbor's cat died when they were three or because they always had to be "it" when they played "Blind-Man's Bluff," they are what they are. In affirming a kind of psychological determinism they do not deny guilt, they simply absolve themselves of any involvement. Now I do not want to oversimplify the mysteries of personality or ignore the positive contribution of psychology, but here again the solution is inadequate. And for the same reason as the first - it affirms too much. If human action has any substance or meaning at all, there must be an element of freedom and responsibility. If I am forced to act as I do by an irresistible fate, then there is no such thing as good and evil or truth and falsity. The very statement of this position could not be judged true on these grounds, for if one has to say it, it has no meaning. Once again, because these structures of life are self-authenticating, I cannot absolve my guilt by disclaiming any responsibility.

The third approach is a little closer to realism; it recognizes guilt but tries to lessen its significance. If one can find a way to say that guilt is not really important, then he can be done with it. A popular means of doing this is to observe the shortcomings of everyone else. Somehow there is comfort in numbers. If I find out that a lot of other people are doing the same thing, it tends to allay my disturbed conscience. For example, the publication of the Kinsey Report undoubtedly had moral implications. If one learns that over half of today's married men are carrying on "an outside affair," it tends to lessen the tension about his own infidelity. Here the sense of guilt is handled by trying "to lose it in the crowd." But does it really work? No, because it leaves untouched the basic set of values that give guilt its content. It may give surface relief by diverting attention, but nothing substantial is really changed. To refer back to our drunken father, would it have changed things at all if right after his accident a neighbor had gotten drunk and done the same thing? Not really, because the sins of another can never atone for our own, though they may distract our attention from our own needs.

A fourth way of handling guilt is to try to ignore it or escape from it. Here one does not quarrel with the fact that guilt is there; one simply tries to find ways to keep it "out of sight" and "out of mind." To accomplish this some turn to frenzied activity. They never allow themselves a moment's solitude. Radios are put everywhere so there will always be noise; tranquilizers are taken to hasten sleep.

Sunday Morning, September 24, 1961

One joins a dozen clubs and stays busy every second. In this way the moment of truth is kept "at arm's length." Other people take whisky as their escape. They cannot stand to face themselves so they rely more and more on this "bonded tranquility" that releases them from reality for a few hours. But again, is this anymore successful than the other approaches? Most assuredly not, for it too is right on the surface. It is defensive in the sense that it leaves untouched the source of the difficulty. It is like going from one room to the other with a bad cold. Changing the surroundings does not remove the cause of the misery, and trying to run from guilt is as futile as running from your shadow - it is a part of you that cannot be "lost."

A fifth approach is by far the best of the lot, for it takes seriously the reality of guilt - this is the way of self-punishment. Recognizing the extent of evil, one tries to set the record straight by exacting some price from his misdeeds. The case that got Sigmund Freud first interested in psychoanalysis was a matter of this sort. A young woman who could not move her legs was brought to him. He could find no physical explanation for this, and as he began to probe further she told him more about her life. It seems she had secretly fallen in love with her older sister's husband, and wished to herself that the sister would die. Suddenly one day this happened, and she felt so guilty at having wished it that she became emotionally ill. These tensions were repressed into her subconscious and expressed themselves in paralysis, a condition that made her unattractive to her widowed brother-in-law. This was her way of punishing herself. And this is but one example of a person trying to equalize the ledger and get retribution for their sin. But once more it falls short, for there is no finality or release here. Men never know when they have done enough, become more and more morbid, and more and more enslaved. Soren Kierkegaard's father had cursed God once while a shepherd boy in Denmark, and all his life he brooded over this act. Punish himself as he would, he could never forgive himself completely. Many is the person who has snapped in two or gone frustrated to his grave in trying to punish himself but never finding relief.

This is by no means an exhaustive survey, but these are some of the forms of this first approach to dealing with sin. They run the whole gamut of differences, but they are the same in result - none of them are successful. You can as well converse with your echo as deal effectively with your own sins. You have done them, you have failed, you have violated your sense of rightness, and no matter what you do that fact remains. Like a man who falls and breaks his leg and is unable to do what needs to be done by himself, so guilt dealt with in isolation can only get worse.

But there is a second approach to the matter that is radically different - calling in another Resource. Instead of striving to solve it alone, here one takes his guilt and openly lays it before God. Now the moment this is done, the whole process is seen in a different light. It is no longer solely an individual concern. A new dimension is added, that of responsibility to God. No more is it simply a question of what I have done; it is now obvious that this is strength that God has given me, and that I have ignored His will, violated His confidence and betrayed the trust between us. Therefore my implication is deepened, for added to my personal failure is estrangement from God. If I steal my father's car and have a costly wreck, I am faced with two conditions: the material loss and the personal betrayal. And so it is when we bring our lives in relation to God: the situation gets worse, for the dimension of unfaithfulness is added to individual frustration.

But this new Factor also offers the hope for solution. If sin is only an individual act, there is no release, for what is done cannot be undone. But if it is basically an act in relationship, then the Other One could move in to help. And this is precisely the truth of the Gospel. In Jesus Christ, God meets us in our sin and

Sunday Morning, September 24, 1961

makes a daring offer. He promises that if we will confess our sin - honestly face it for what it is and change our whole attitude toward it - then He will forgive us - remove the burden and let us start afresh. Someone has said that repentance and forgiveness are like death and resurrection. In repentance we acknowledge openly our evil and "die" with it in repulsion; we literally change directions as far as our desire is concerned. Then God raises us up with the freshness of new birth to begin anew.

This is "the saving secret" I want to proclaim. This is a way of dealing with our sins and overcoming them. I want to emphasize the decisive nature of forgiveness. It is not an idea or a feeling; it is a concrete act, an event, a cause from which come definite effects. So many people never recognize the cutting edge of finality here. They brood over their sins and mumble confessions, but they never take them to God and have them removed. If you will review the Biblical figures, you will find that forgiveness is always a graphic act. It is sometimes pictured as redemption; a slave is bought and then set free. Again it is spoken of as "blotting out"; marks on a page are washed away and are no more. Or we hear of the Lamb "who taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). This is the act of removal where an object is literally separated from us. And God promises "to remember our sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). That which you forget ceases to exist as far as you are concerned; it is pushed into the realm of non-existence; it is no longer operative in the present. All of the figures imply definitive action. Just as we do something when we sin, so God does something when He forgives. Just as water set out in the blazing sun will evaporate, so sin brought to God in confession and repentance will cease to exist.

This brings me back to my original question: what do you do with your sins? When you violate your own sense of right and wrong, how do you handle your guilt? Do you try to deal with it yourself? Do you deny it or disclaim it or lessen it or run from it or try to requite it? Or have you learned the saving secret in Christ - to confess, repent, and walk away forgiven? The first way leads to failure, the second to spiritual health. In our sinful world, it is the only way to overcome our guilt.

Bishop James A. Pike sums it up perfectly in a familiar personal experience. His family went to a cottage on Cape Cod for a vacation, and found no means of garbage disposal. They bought sacks and cans, but it began to accumulate and become a problem. The only solution was to call in an outside agency and establish a pattern of removal. And so it is with our sins; if left lying around they will cause trouble; there needs to be some pattern of removal, and this is the saving secret of Divine forgiveness.

The question then is this: What do you do with your sins? The answer is: Confess them, and God will be faithful and just to forgive them and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness.

Arise then, and come to Him!