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Good News for the Sore Conscience!

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TEXT: Hebrews 10:11-25 (ESV)

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying,

“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,”

then he adds,

“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

When I was a young boy, about eight years old, I had these friends who were experimenting with smoking cigarettes. They would lift a pack from their dad when he

wasn't looking and sneak out behind the barn to smoke them. One day they talked me into trying this with them. I didn't enjoy it, and I felt like I'd done something terrible and could hardly look at my mom and dad in the face when I went home for supper that evening. And when I went to bed that night, I didn't sleep well. The next morning, before mom and dad were out of bed, I couldn't stand it anymore. I ran into their bedroom and confessed, "I smoked cigarettes yesterday. I feel terrible about it. I'm sorry." I had a sore conscience. Ever had one of those?

Recently, we observed Reformation Sunday, which is the end of October. Remember the story of Martin Luther? He was tortured over his sinfulness – his guilt and shame before God – despairing over that relationship because he was a sinner. He had a sore conscience. And, of course, Martin Luther wasn't the first. You remember King David after he committed adultery with Bathsheba. He tried to hide it. But then he testifies later on, in Psalm, 32, about this experience that he was absolutely miserable before God. He had a sore conscience. And in the New Testament, there's ol' Paul in Romans 7, talking about "What a wretched man I am. I keep doing what I don't want to do and not doing what I set out to do. Who will deliver me from this body of death?" That's the sore conscience.

And it's still present today in people's lives. I've witnessed it as a pastor. I've done enough pastoral counseling over the years again and again, and seen these sessions turn into times of confession. They have a sore conscience, these folks that come in to see me. They need healing. Guilt runs rampant in the body of Christ. Though you already know you often feel guilty, it's important that we say it now and then because you would be surprised how often we miss it. Right now, you may be feeling guilty about one thing or another: what you said your wife last night, the lustful thoughts in your mind. You maybe did something years ago, and nobody knows. If a great sign could be put over your head telling the world what you've done, you'd absolutely die. Maybe it's lying or cheating. Maybe it was a little thing, but it's eating away at you, making you feel anxious, down, depressed, and even fearful. You wonder if God could possibly let someone like you into his Heaven.

Well, our passage for today from Hebrews contains some very good news for sore consciences. It says that Jesus, our great high priest, has taken care of our sin once and for all by his sacrifice. A little background on this: the high priest in Jewish religion had the role of entering the Holy of Holies room in the Tabernacle, and then later in the

temple, to offer a blood sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world. This happened annually. Only the high priest was allowed to do this. The writer of Hebrews, prior to today's passage, goes to great lengths to tell and convince us that Jesus is superior to any high priest that preceded him in that old sacrificial system from the Old Testament. He's the son of God. "True God, true man," we're told; of one being with the father. And unlike the priests of old, who are sinners themselves, Jesus was without sin, living a life of perfect obedience before God. We're told he is the only high priest we need for our sore conscience, for our sin, because he sympathizes with us. He became one of us. He knows the human condition and the temptations that come our way to rebel against God and try to do life our way instead of God's; for Jesus, too, was tempted. And he has sacrificed himself once and for all for our forgiveness at the cross. Eternal redemption through his blood – his blood cleanses us, sanctifies us before God. He is the perfect sacrifice, bearing the sins of many at the cross. That old sacrificial system is no longer valid or needed, the blood of goats and bulls does not forgive sins. All of that was a mere foreshadowing of the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the son of God, for the sins of the world. Try as we may to earn God's forgiveness, to make things right on our own, to offer our own personal sacrifices or our own promises to God, these all fall short. Christ alone is our antidote for a sin.

Christian apologist Gregory Koukl uses the following analogies to show how the Cross of Christ is the one and only solution we need. I found this helpful.

Most ailments need particular antidotes. Increasing the air pressure in our tires will not fix a troubled carburetor. Aspirin will not dissolve a tumor. Cutting up credit cards will not wipe out debt that's already owed. If your water pipes are leaking, you call a plumber, not an oncologist; but a plumber will not cure cancer. Any adequate solution must solve the problem that needs to be solved, and singular problems need singular solutions. Some antidotes are one of a kind cures for one of a kind ailments. Sometimes only one medicine will do the job as much as we may like it to be otherwise. Humankind faces a singular problem. People are broken and ruined by human rebellion, and humans like you and I are guilty, enslaved, lost, dead; every one of us everywhere. The guilt must be punished. The debt must be repaid. The slave must be purchased. Promising better conduct in the future will not mend the crimes of the past. No, a rescuer must ransom the slave. A kindred brother must pay the family debt. A substitute must shoulder the guilt. There's no other way of escape. And Jesus did just that for us as our great high priest.

And now we're told that Jesus sits at the right hand of God. What does that mean? The priest, you see, had to stand to make those sacrifices in the Holy of Holies. But now Jesus is sitting, as if to signify the sacrificial work is finished at the cross. He said that, didn't he? He said in his last breath: "It is finished." The debt for sin is paid in full. We don't need to carry it any longer. Hebrews tells us that the Holy Spirit, through Jeremiah the prophet, actually pointed to this new day that has now arrived, about a new covenant, a new people with new hearts and minds that know and intend to do God's will – not yet perfectly – but by the power of the Holy Spirit. And God remembers our sins no more and forgives us, so there's no more need for any sin offerings.

Years ago, I heard the story of a priest who had a woman in his parish who claimed that she had conversations with God – that God would actually talk to her. The priest didn't believe her, but one day said to her, "Well, if God is talking to you, then ask him what terrible thing your priest did years ago as a boy." She said she'd ask. The next time he saw her, he asked, "Did you ask God to tell you what terrible thing your priest did?" She said, "Yes, I did." "Well, what did he say?" asked the priest. She smiled and said, "God said, 'I don't remember.'" Trusting in Christ's sacrifice, I have assurance – I know that my sins are forgiven, forgotten forever.

So he goes on to say, therefore, because of all these things, what Christ has done for us, since we now have confidence to enter God's holy presence through Christ Jesus, and we have this great high priest named Jesus over the House of God, let's draw near to God with a true heart and in full assurance of faith. With our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with the pure waters of baptism. We're his and it's a new day. You belong to him. Trust in what God has done for you and Christ at the cross. The writer of Hebrews is saying, "Let him minister to you." I know sometimes that's difficult for us, to trust God's grace. It seems just too good to be true. I recall a story that I read in a book, *Letters to a Young Evangelical* by Dr. Tony Campolo, that shares a time in his youth when he was about to take communion in his congregation. He writes about what happened:

Sitting with my parents at a communion service when I was perhaps six or seven years old, I became aware of a young woman in front of us who was sobbing and shaking. The minister had just finished reading the passage of scripture by Paul that says "Whoever shall eat the bread and drink the Cup of the Lord unworthy

shall be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. As the communion plate with its small pieces of bread was passed to the crying woman before me, she waved it away and then lowered her head in despair. It was then that my father leaned over her shoulder and in his broken Sicilian English said sternly, "Take it, girl. It was meant for you. Do you hear me?" She raised her head and nodded, and then she took the bread and ate it. I knew at that moment some heavy burden had been lifted from her heart and mind.

It's for you. Trust in that, the forgiveness of sins.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to say, "And let us hold fast to the confession of hope and Christ without wavering." Don't be tempted to go back to the old system of trying to make things right on your own between you and God, to earn his forgiveness and favor, it will do you no good. That's what Satan would have you believe. He loves to prey upon our sore consciences and mix us up. "Hold fast," he says; like the old hymn says, "Cling to the old rugged cross." Why? Because God, who has promised, is faithful. He faithfully raised Jesus from the dead as an endorsement of that sacrifice for sin as a great big yes – that the sacrifice has taken place and it is once and for all and it's good. God is trustworthy. Hold fast, hold fast to that confession of faith. Let this hymn be your constant hope and theme the rest of your life.

My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

No merit of my own I claim, but wholly lean on Jesus' name.

On Christ, the solid rock, I stand. All other ground is sinking sand.

And then our writer finishes up by saying, "And let us draw near in worship as a community so that we might encourage one another to trust in these promises of Christ and faithfully serve him." You and I are not safe to be lone rangers. We are weak, too weak, and vulnerable on our own. We need each other as saints and sinners in Christ to keep us humble and yet strong in faith and encouragement and service to Christ. As Leonardo da Vinci said one time, "An arch consists of two weaknesses which, leaning against one another, makes a strength."

I want to conclude this message today with a wonderful analogy I came across by Christian author and pastor Max Lucado. He writes,

I grew up playing football in the empty field next to our house. Many a Sunday afternoon was spent imitating Don Meredith or Bob Hayes or Johnny Unitas.

Empty fields in West Texas have grass burrs in them, and grass burrs hurt. You

can't play football without falling, and you can't fall in a West Texas field without getting stuck by burrs. More times than I can remember, I pulled myself out of a sticker patch so hopelessly covered that I had to have help. Kids didn't rely on other kids to pull out grass burrs. You need someone with skill. I would limp to the house so my dad could pluck out the stickers one by painful one. I wasn't too bright, but I knew this: if I wanted to get back to the game, I needed to get rid of those stickers. Every mistake in life is like a grass burr. You can't live without falling and you can't fall without getting stuck. But guess what? We are aren't always as smart as those young ballplayers. We sometimes try to get back into the game without dealing with the stickers. It's as if we don't want anyone to know we fell, so we pretend we never did. And consequently, we live in pain. We can't walk well, sleep well, rest well, and oh, we are so touchy. Does God want us to live like that? No way. Listen to his promise. This is my commitment to my people: the removal of their sins. God does more than forgive our mistakes. He removes them. We simply have to take them to him. And the first step after a stumble is in the direction of the cross.

If we confess our sins to God, he can always be trusted to forgive us and cleanse us and take our sin away. And that, my friends, is today's good news for those with a sore conscience. Amen.