

Sermon 51, Why No More Sacrifices?, Hebrews 10:15-18

Proposition: Sacrifices are gone because sin is forgiven, dealt with in Christ!

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this morning to the final summary of Hebrews' main theological teaching. The rest of the book is application, just as we find in, say, Ephesians, where the first half is doctrine and the second half practice. Here in Hebrews about two-thirds is doctrine and the final third practice. Remember, the writer has been showing us the superiority of Christ to the Levitical system. In his rapid-fire summary here at the end of the doctrinal part of the letter, he has presented evidence from Ps 40 and from Ps 110. Now he clinches the argument with a quote from Jeremiah 31. Where did Levitical sacrifices go? They went away because Jesus has actually taken away our sins!

I. Jesus Explained the End of the Levitical System, vv. 5-9

To review just a tiny bit more, Ps 40 sets the Levitical sacrifices and the will of God in opposition to one another. Our passage begins "The Holy Spirit also bears witness." In other words, the Spirit stands as an additional witness, a second witness or third witness. We heard the testimony of Jesus back in vv. 5-9, where Ps 40 recounts what He said to the Father: "I have come to do thy will, O God." Then we heard the testimony of the Father: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." That's a direct quote from Yahweh in Ps 110:1. And now that the Father and the Son have both borne witness to the end of the Levitical sacrifices, the writer includes a third testimony — a testimony from the Spirit. Again, review: The Son testified that the Father did not actually want animal sacrifices. The Father testified that His Son would sit at His right hand, having triumphed over all His enemies (including sin). And now the Spirit

testifies, in terms appropriate to His role as the one who applies the work of Jesus to us, that our sin is really and truly gone.

II. The Spirit Also Explains the End of the Levitical System, vv. 15-18

In the mouth of two or three witnesses let everything be established. Two persons of the Trinity have testified. Now the third takes the stand, and He too explains that the way it used to be done no longer applies. Now there is no more sacrifice for sin. Now there is no need for the descendants of Aaron to ply their priestly trade. The bulls and goats and rams of Canaan can dwell in safety from the sacerdotal knife. And what's most amazing is that this, like all the rest of Hebrews' arguments, is clearly written in the OT for those with eyes to see.

A. Where: Jer 31

Where does the Spirit testify to this reality that the Levitical system is going to come to an end? He does it right in Jeremiah 31. We looked at this passage a few weeks ago in Heb 8. Now the writer quotes the money line, the one right at the end of the passage. Remember, Jeremiah is an extended warning to the people of Judah. Most of the book is telling them to repent before Babylon comes and destroys them, or else telling them that God will take vengeance for them on Babylon and restore their fortunes after they have suffered exile there. As we saw, Jer 31 is a brief bright spot in an otherwise dark book. It's a place where God announces that though Babylon is coming, He is not finished with Judah. He is going to institute a new covenant.

B. What: The New Covenant

That leads us to the question: What's new about this new covenant? Jeremiah points out two major things.

1. The Law Written on the Heart

First, God is going to put His laws on the hearts of His people. What does this mean? It means that He will renew us internally so that we intuitively and instinctively know what He requires. Without the law on our hearts, we can rush ahead and sin without even feeling any different. When there is no law on the heart, we do things that are awful, wicked, wrong, and disastrous — and we don't even notice. The bad things seem neutral to us, or even good. We have lost the standard of right and wrong.

Man is a creature that can get used to anything. Some people's consciences are so dead, the image of God's uprightness so bleared and defaced in them, that they hardly even recognize anymore that it is wrong for them to be treated this way. Think of the porn star, who has been so defiled that she now doesn't even recognize what a rotten life she leads. In her mind, this is normal and sex work is a perfectly legitimate career choice. Think of the liberal pastor, teaching people that God is dead. He doesn't even recognize how scummy he has become, even though when he was a child praying at his mother's knee he would have instinctively recognized that someone who doesn't believe in Jesus has no business preaching and teaching in the church.

Without the law written on the heart, we can get used to, even think we enjoy, situations that are objectively wrong and harmful. The new covenant addresses that problem by restoring the law written on the heart. When you are saved, the Spirit applies God's truth to you, writing

the law on your heart so that you no longer are content to live in a wicked way or a wicked situation.

How does the new covenant promise of the law written on the heart speak to you this morning? It should tell you that you need to study the law that's written on paper. You need to know the word of God that's outside you so that you can recognize the word of God that's inside you. You see, there are many things written on your heart. When you are saved, God writes His law on your heart — but He does not immediately erase all of the other things that are there. That's why conscience is not a sufficient guide. As I was just saying, you can get used to all kinds of wicked and improper situations. Based on your background, what your parents did, what your childhood church taught, you may have a lot of false things also written on your heart. They are not engraved as deeply as the law of God, but they are there. Do not ever think that it is a good idea to “follow your heart,” even after God has renewed His law there. You need to follow the law, not your heart. Following your heart makes as much sense as following paper or following stone. What's important is not the material, the substrate, but rather what's written on it.

So you have God's law on your heart. You cannot be satisfied with evil. But one thing that the law will do, must do, always does, is point out where you don't measure up. If I say to a bunch of fat people, “Be healthy. Eat right and exercise,” they hear that as condemnation. That's because it's the law. It's commands. Those commands say “You aren't healthy. You aren't eating right and exercising.”

God's law won't allow you to be content in sin, but it also won't let you move past sins that you have stopped sinning. The law never forgets. The moral law has no statute of limitations. There is no forgiveness for theft or adultery just because it happened fifty years ago. It was wrong then and it's wrong now.

2. Sins Forgotten

But brothers and sisters, that's what the second promise of the new covenant addresses. When God renewed His relationship with His people in Christ, He made a way to deal with all the things that the law condemned. Those sins of your youth and childhood, those sins that you walked in for years but have been able to root out of your life by God's grace — they will be forgotten by God Almighty. The one who knows everything will turn away from your sins and forget they ever existed.

God will not remember sins or lawless deeds. At the same time that He reminds you of everything He ever said to do, by writing it on your heart, He will forget everything that you ever did contrary to what He said. This is the paradox of the Christian faith, and the Christian life. In the new covenant, obedience is very important, the law is very important, but forgiveness is very important too. God lets you off the hook even as He shows you just how big and sharp the hook is. He no longer condemns your lawless deeds even as He reminds you of His law.

That's the new covenant. That's the testimony of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity and the third divine person to testify to God's saving work in the new covenant and how it is superior to the provisions of the old covenant.

Jesus' death in your place absorbed every last ounce of God's condemnation of lawbreaking. Jesus paid it all. He didn't pay most of it; He didn't give a matching grant; He paid it all, and you owe Him everything. Sin had left that crimson stain; He washed it white as snow.

C. Why

The Spirit, now speaking through the Hebrew writer instead of through Jeremiah, adds a further explanation. The Levitical system had to end the moment sins were actually carried away and forgotten.

1. The Levitical System Existed to Deal with Sin, v. 18

That's because the Levitical system existed to deal with sin. What drove the whole thing was the worshipers' consciousness of guilt, a consciousness that drove them to bring sacrifice after sacrifice and offering after offering. Things that have no purpose are allowed to lapse, to end. You have probably seen an empty factory somewhere in the USA. It has no purpose; there is no point making things in it that can be made for a tenth of the price in China. But the Levitical system was never allowed to lapse. Up until the day that the Roman army came and tore the temple stone from stone, the Levitical sacrifices trundled on, for they had a purpose: they existed to take away sin. As we know, the "sin" industries today have plenty of customers. If you sell weed or other drugs, you will not lack for buyers. If you offer forgiveness of sins, you're offering something everyone needs — but that few know they want until the law has been written on their heart and they are convinced of just how wicked they actually are.

The Levitical system had a use from the beginning. It was targeted toward taking away the sins of those who knew they were sinners. That's why many or most Israelites made use of it from the time of the Exodus all the way down to AD 70.

2. Once Jesus Dealt with Sin, the Levitical System Ended, v. 18

But then Jesus appeared, and dealt with sin once and for all. That rendered the Levitical system worthless at a stroke.

Have you ever tried to buy a new typewriter? They are for sale, but they are not exactly front and center at Office Depot. Why? Because they are not nearly as useful as a computer-based word processor. Once the word processor entered, the typewriter made a hasty exit. It is well known that thanks to computers, we are using far less paper in this country than we used to. Well, in the same way, once the Lamb of God died, a bull and a goat had no remaining religious value. Where forgiveness is found, where God can be induced to forget all the wrong you've ever done and no longer hold it against you, the Levitical system and any other system of pleasing God by what you can do comes to end. There are no more animal offerings available for the people of God — because they didn't do anything to actually deal with sin anyway. The Levitical system is kaput. That is the Holy Spirit's testimony to the church.

III. Application

So what should we do?

A. Remember and Obey the Law

First of all, live as new covenant people. Live according to the law that's written on your heart. That means, as I said, learning the law as it's written in the book. Remember it and obey it. Don't

think that evil actions and situations are OK. The law forbids them, and forbids you to participate in them.

B. Never Seek Salvation Through the Law

Nor should you seek salvation through the law. The law brings wrath. Being good is not the way to heaven, for you aren't good enough to get there and you will never be good enough to get there — not through law-keeping, anyway. The notion that all one needs is the law, without forgiveness, was the mistake of the Pharisees and of their heirs ever since. Jesus tore into them because their self-righteousness was unrighteousness. In going about to show everyone how good they were, they only succeeded in being rotten human beings.

How might you and I seek salvation through the law? It can definitely be through having the right opinions in the culture war in our poisonous cultural climate. Now, it's not wrong to be on the right side in the culture war. But it is most definitely wrong to think that being on the right side in the culture war is going to save you from anything. Plenty of culture warriors find out that their child is gay, that their church is not as conservative as they are, that God's word doesn't actually support their views or that they have replaced Jesus with being on the right side politically. Brothers and sisters, these things happen to culture warriors. But no one who ever trusted in Jesus woke up one morning and found that Jesus broke His promise, that He let His people down, that He is not the Savior He said He was. Plenty of people have found that He is not the Savior they thought He was, but that's only because their view of His salvation was wrong from the beginning. Jesus never said "Your children will believe just like you," but He did say "I will receive everyone who comes to me." He never said "Your church will always do the right thing" but He did say "I will never leave you or forsake you."

So don't seek salvation through the law of being on the right side in the culture war.

Don't seek salvation through the legal avenue of studying theology. I've met people in Reformed circles who have read Calvin and Bavinck and Turretin and Flavel and Spurgeon and all the other big names, and think that because they can play the "I'm more Reformed than you" game that they must be OK. Nonsense. Head knowledge and book learning are not the way into the Kingdom. Jesus never said "Blessed are the smarty-pants, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."

Don't seek salvation through the false humility of antinomianism, either. This one may be most prevalent of all in our Reformed circles. This is the guy who is always down on his own abilities, who is always talking about how prevalent sin is and how we never measure up, the one who confesses the same sins time after time and never does or tries to do anything about them. This is the guy who constantly focuses on "We will never be good; we will always need Jesus; we are going to let each other down and sin against each other till the day we die."

That's called antinomianism. It means "being against the law." The antinomian has stopped trying to obey God in the mistaken belief that Scripture teaches that too much obedience is legalism. Don't live here! Don't walk around in poor-me mode. Don't let yourself overemphasize the extent of remaining corruption to the point where you are functionally denying the transformation into the image of the Son that is yours in union with Him. Yes,

corruption remains in me and in all of you. No, it is not acceptable to continue to look at dirty pictures, to continue to steal pens and pencils from work and cheat on your taxes, to continue to neglect training your children in godliness, to continue to work every Sunday morning with the excuse that you'll get back to church when your work schedule changes. Brothers and sisters, the law is written on your hearts, but the law is not a way of salvation. Remember both of those truths, and you will thrive in your Christian life. The law is from Jesus, but the law is not Jesus.

C. Your Sins Are Forgotten

You see, Jesus has forgotten your sins. He does not remember them. One of the benefits of the New Covenant which He purchased for us is that we no longer have to walk around in guilt and shame. God already prefigured this by clothing Adam and Eve in the skin of another before they left the Garden. You are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. You are forgiven, and you must not live in guilt as though you weren't forgiven.

"I feel bad" is a sort of mantra among Americans, Christian and non-Christian alike. You better not say it around me, though! The Bible gives you no reason to say it. This habit of wallowing in bad feelings as a way of atoning for your sins against others is absolutely not right. Where does God say "Your penalty will be lessened if you feel bad enough for long enough"? If you did something wrong, repent. If you didn't, you have nothing to feel bad about. And if you have repented, then you have been forgiven and again have nothing to feel bad about.

D. You Must Forget Others' Sins

But the other side of the forgiveness of your sins is that you must forgive others' sins. If God has forgotten your sins, you need to forget the sins of the family in the next pew that sinned against you so badly. You need to forget the sins of the elder who committed a massive faux pas — and he needs to forget yours.

The Spirit testifies that there is forgiveness of sins in this place, the church — the place of this person, the Son of God. He testifies that the Levitical system is dead, buried under a pile of rubble that was once Herod's Temple. He testifies that in Christ, your sin is taken away and your iniquity atoned for. And then He tells you, "If you don't forgive others, your Father won't forgive you." Your Father won't forgive you! Drop the grudges; let go of the right to be offended. Again, lest you misunderstand me, I'm not saying to stop protecting yourself from abusers and predators. But I am very much saying that no matter the offense, you must forgive. You are not allowed to hold a grudge, to walk in bitterness, to be perpetually offended with those who hurt you so deeply. God does not, will not, forgive those who refuse to forgive. There is no more sacrifice, no other sacrifice, than the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It is available to all, on condition that each one forgives his brother from the heart.

Are you ready to do that? Then believe. Forgive, and know that you are forgiven. Jesus' death has truly paid it all. Amen.