

“This Is Life”: The Sinless Life?

Text: 1 John 1:5-2:6

10.7.18



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“Discuss as a group the statement made by sociologist, Christian Smith, concerning the popular approach to the gospel. Do you see/hear indicators that his assumptions may be accurate? What might be appealing about that approach? What might be some of its challenges?”

“What has been your understanding of this big, theological concept called ‘atonement’? Have you heard it more as God’s punitive action or God’s restorative action?”

“How does our understanding of sin determine our understanding of the need for atonement? If sin is simply a legislative concept (breaking God’s rules), how does atonement address it? If sin is a relational concept, how might atonement address it?”

“What might a lifestyle of atonement actually look like?”

Teaching Notes...

Whenever we are exposed to the gospel, it always...

... **disturbs the status-quo.** It challenges our present version of reality and calls into question *who* and *what* we are trusting for life.

... **makes claims on our lives.** It refuses to promote a message that I offers a secure passage-way into the afterlife, but has nothing to say about how I treat my friends, or how I pay attention to my neighbor, or the ethics involved in the ways that I do my job, etc. That couldn’t possibly be considered good news.

... **demands a response.** If we really believe that God is offering us a ‘better’ way to live, then we can only realize the “freedom” that it offers by actually trusting another way to be human: a re-ordering which makes such repentance valid/identifiable.

In order to produce such profound results, God must act unexpectedly. He must begin by attaching value to us which will help to remove any anxiety that I might feel about trying to perform and offer us the security of love.

He must intercede (intervene) for us before we are aware of our need. He must “*find us*” when we are not looking for him. He must hold out his hand even when we refuse to reach back (Isaiah 65:2). Then, only in the context of committed-relationship (covenant), does he expect that our lives will begin to demonstrate what I call “uncomplicated obedience” (“... *the obedience that comes from faith*...” Romans 1:5)

Sociologist, Christian Smith, researched the current generation who had grown up in the incubator of the church and describes their faith as, “***moral, therapeutic deism***”.

Moralistic – What God desires is compliant children. What he is generally after is obedience. It’s what makes him happy. The presumed condition behind all of his commands? “***Because I said so***”...

Therapeutic – God wants humanity to be happy and well-adjusted. This coincides with the first assumption: “If God’s happy, we’ll all be happy.”

Deism – There is a God who made the world, but he’s relatively indifferent about what happens here.

On the surface, MTD doesn’t sound all that bad, right? In this expression, we don’t have to expend a great deal of energy on “knowing God”, but simply accommodating his list of demands. We can avoid all the ‘self-denial’ language and access the “performance enhancing” qualities of religion. We can eliminate the pesky bouts of conscience because God remains fairly disinterested in the details of our eating, sleeping, working, recreating lives.

We always embody the gospel that we embrace. The gospel we embrace shapes the kind of followers we become.

If you sense that, at this point, your life is fairly manageable, then the gospel will become nothing more than an ‘upgrade’ which allows you to eliminate some of the *system’s glitches*. If it’s simply about going to heaven when you die, you can ignore all the ways you neglect your spouse, belittle your children, ignore your neighbor and cheat your boss out of hours.

But, if you have no illusions about how your life is spiraling out-of-control, then you’ll need the good news of a rescuer who has come to lead you out of your own self-directed, self-indulgent life. You’ll need the hope of a renewed vision of what is possible for your life now that God’s desires, God’s will, God’s ways (Kingdom) are giving

direction to and empowering your journey. You'll need a "new heart" (Jeremiah 31-32; Ezekiel 36).

As Christians, whatever we have to say about life and love, has to be connected with Jesus. Whatever we say about Jesus, has to be tethered to the biblical narrative.

By using the personal name, "Jesus", he is affirming the historical nature of our faith. By using the title, "Christ" (anointed one; messiah), he is connecting Jesus' life and historical interactions with this particular Jewish story.

The gospel is God's way of explaining the story. The gospel tells us why we are dissatisfied, why we struggle with relationships, why we have war and racism and sex-trafficking. The gospel shows the rugged determination of God to recover and restore all that was lost due to deception and defiance.

It's not until we observe the movements of God toward us (grace) that we are made aware of the depth of our brokenness-- the gravity of our situation apart from him.

In this passage, we run into this weighty, theological concept identified as, 'atonement': It is a multi-faceted concept which means *"to cleanse, to make reconciliation, to cancel a debt, to forgive"*.

Atonement is every movement of God toward his creation motivated by his loving-purpose of setting things right.

Atonement is what I call, the robust resolution to the multi-dimensional human dilemma (which is actually the God-dilemma, as well).

How you understand atonement will depend on your understanding of sin.

If we begin at Genesis 3, atonement is about retribution (for sin). If we begin at Genesis 1, atonement is about restoration (from sin).

If we begin with "wrath", we tell a story of the way that atonement de-escalates a divine dilemma. If we begin with restoration, we tell a story of how God is both "free" (able to do what pleases him) and "faithful", committed to addressing the chaos and putting things back in order (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).

Sin: who we are in light of who we were created to be (Romans 3:23).

Sin is the common human condition. Dysfunctionality is the common human dilemma. We are all from a long-line of sinners.

In ancient cultures, sacrifices were performed in order to appease an angry deity and ensure a more favorable posture. The gods were fickle and unpredictable, subject to 'mood-swings'. You were never really sure which god you were approaching that day.

In the unfolding revelation of their own God, the Jewish people had such practices, as well.

John's readers would have been familiar with sacrifices as a common element their worship.

~ Sacrifice always seemed to involve the sense that humans were offering something of value to God, not just to appease him or coerce a response, but out of gratitude for his stubborn-commitment to them.

~ In the sacrifice, there was also the sense of identification; that somehow what was happening in the process to this seemingly innocent animal was a dramatic portrayal of our own sin and guilt.

~There was a sense that because of the sacrifice, you were somehow forgiven; you were no longer identified by your sin (not that you hadn't done it, but that it would not be held against you). Atonement essentially says that God would never use your sin as an excuse not to love you.

Real love is always only definable through atonement.

1 John 4:10 *"This is real love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as a sacrifice to take away our sin".*

No one attempts, nor experiences, the kind of deep-heart transformation that this Story portrays without a greater incentive than, "being good"... but, we would do it for love.

So, grace always 'frontloads' acceptance and goodness. Instead of insisting that we perform (to be noticed/validated), it begins by conferring value upon us and then invites us to live a life that's "worthy" (congruent; equally weighty), in response (Ephesians 4:1; 5:2).

The central theme of the story of Christianity is that Jesus' death with, for and instead of us somehow put us back in right relationship with God, each other and the entire created order: 'new creation'.

At the heart of all of our theories is the story of "Exodus"--- the story of Passover. The old story involved the sacrifice of a lamb in order to deliver them from death and liberate them from bondage in Egypt.

The new story is that Jesus is 'the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). Instead of smearing blood on the door, Jesus asks his followers to drink the wine (as representative of his death for them) so that they might not have to 'taste death', but that he could 'taste death for them'.

Isaiah 53:12 I will give him the honors of one who is mighty and great, because he exposed himself to death. He was counted among those who were sinners. He bore the sins of many and interceded for sinners.

The biographers are all suggesting that what we are watching, in often encrypted ways, is God himself (with skin: incarnation) entering our dilemma--- meeting us at the place of our pain and ruin and suffering--- and actually taking it upon himself so that we might experience the life for which we were created.

Atonement was never offered simply as a ritual to be performed, but a lifestyle to be adopted.

The goal of atonement is the restoration of relationship with God, with one another and the entire created order which makes possible a community of shalom.