



Respectable Sins: The Good News

Fr. William Klock

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I'm wondering if any of you have seen the recent movie, *Amazing Grace*, about the life of William Wilberforce. If you've seen it, good for you. If you haven't, you really should. The movie tells the story of Wilberforce's efforts to pass legislation in Parliament to ban the slave trade.

Wilberforce's priest should be a familiar name: John Newton. Among other things, he's famous for penning the words of the favourite hymn, *Amazing Grace*. And there's a spectacular scene in the movie, where the aged Newton proclaims to Wilberforce, "My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour." Those words come from a man who made his living in the slave trade as a ship captain, taking slaves captured in Africa to trading ports in the Americas. It was only after health problems took him out of that career, that he began to study theology and later became a priest.

In a lot of ways Newton is not very different from St. Paul. We don't know all the specific things Paul engaged in to persecute the Church, but we do know that he was a zealous persecutor of Christians. Acts 7 gives the account of his standing by to hold the coats of those who stoned Stephen, the first martyr, and in Chapter 9 we read some more about his hunting down Christians so they could be brought before the Jewish authorities. And looking back on his pre-conversion days, St. Paul wrote to Timothy describing himself as "a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent" of Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 1:13). But only two verses later he also says, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1:15).

St. Paul and John Newton clearly saw the sin in their lives. In fact, the older they got, the more both of them came to see the seriousness and heinousness of their sins. I would think that most or not all of us here have been in church services where people shared their stories of coming to Christ. On two occasions, a long time ago, I had to give my testimony before the

congregation in order to join a church. And in both cases, the people who stood up before me to share what had happened to them, told dramatic stories of redemption – how Christ had saved them from a life of drugs, crime, and violence. Those were the sorts of stories that make you realise that Jesus really does go after and save sinners. By comparison my story is pretty boring. And that's the case for many of us. We've never committed what we think of as the "big" sins. We've never lived lives of crime. But the fact is that Jesus saved each of us just as much as he did the mafia hitman or the drug dealer. You don't have to commit the "big" sins to be just as much a sinner. You'll remember that last time I made the point that to transgress God's Law in event the smallest part is to be guilty of the whole thing. Gossip, resentment, worldliness, anxiety, or even making an idol of your favourite sports team are all sins for which Christ is the only cure. The problem with our more subtle sins is that we don't notice them. Sometimes they even become acceptable. It's relatively easy for the murderer to give up murdering when he comes to Christ, but it's not so easy to give up our "small" and "respectable" sins. Each of us should be saying with John Newton: "I am a great sinner, but I have a great Saviour."

You see, it's easy to look at the troubled kid into drugs that drops into the Bridge, the person at the AIDS clinic, or one of our politicians and think, "Boy they sure need the Gospel." But the fact is that each of us, you and I both, need the Gospel just as much as they do. Notice that both St. Paul and John Newton talked about themselves as sinners in the *present* tense. In fact, if you look at Paul's epistles he saw himself in a worse light as time went on, first writing to the Corinthians and describing himself as "the very least of all the *apostles*," then five years later writing to the Ephesians and saying that he was "the very least of all the *saints*," and finally a few more years later to Timothy describing himself as "the foremost of sinners."

Both of these godly examples, as the years went by and as they grew more and more in their Christ-like character, also came more and more to see that they were *still* sinners. The more we mature in our faith, the more the Spirit will magnify the existing sins in our lives.

The remedy is in the Gospel itself – in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. Through him we are saved not only from the penalty of our sins, but also from the dominion that sin once had in our lives. We sang about this two-fold aspect of sin just a few minutes ago in the hymn *Rock of Ages*:

Let the water and the blood,
From the riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the *double cure*,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.

The Gospel is for sinners. We've got the first part of the cure down pretty well – Christ has paid the penalty for us and removed our guilt – but the second part – saving us from sin's power – isn't always as easy.

But that's exactly what the Gospel does for us. It reminds us first and foremost that we are sinners. It prepares our hearts for the bad news, but it also gives us the good news. It prepares us to face up to our sin, because the Gospel reminds us that God has dealt with our guilt. It assures us that our sins, past, present, and future, have been forgiven. St. Paul gives us assurance when he writes:

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sons are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.
(Romans 4:7-8)

Last week we read Isaiah's description of what was to him to be the future work of the Messiah: "the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Is. 53:6)

The key is for us to understand, as we saw last time, just how much our sin offends against the holiness and justice of God. We need to understand just what it was that Christ did for us in dying in our place. And if we understand the magnitude of what God has done so that we can be reconciled to him, we can have confidence that God is for us. He's no longer our enemy. And in fact, knowing that we were his enemies and that even though we despised him, he chose to redeem us, the Gospel message should motivate us to serve him out of gratitude.

There's a story of a young woman who was sent to assassinate Elizabeth I. She knew that her only chance of getting close to the queen was while she was asleep. And so she managed to get into the palace,

into the queen's quarters, and hid in a wardrobe with a knife. What she didn't know was that the queen's guards searched those quarters ever evening. When they found the assassin they dragged her before the queen, who had every right to have her put to death. The young woman pleaded with the queen for her life, and the queen chose to spare her. The story goes that out of gratitude, that young woman became one of the queen's most loyal, devoted, and trusted servants. She deserved death, but because she had been spared she was motivated to faithful service out of gratitude. God has done the same for us, and we ought to respond the same way. We know our duty, but duty without desire only makes for drudgery. We need to daily preach the Gospel to ourselves, reminding ourselves of what God has done for us and motivating ourselves to serve him out of gratitude.

Let me put it another way: I think everyone knows just how hard earning living can be. A lot of us have taken jobs we never intended to be in, that we didn't like, and that were sheer drudgery. Many of us could work through our entire career and never earn a million dollars, no matter how hard we work and no matter how many hours we put in. But imagine that your boss, on your first day at a job you didn't want to do, simply handed you a million dollars. I guarantee you'd jump into your work and you'd do it with a smile on your face. That's what God's service is like. We can never work hard enough to earn his favour. Imagine being given the job of cleaning all the bathrooms in Grand Central Station – alone – and with your tongue. Trying to earn God's favour is even worse and more impossible than that! But the good news is that we don't have to earn God's favour. Jesus already did that for us. This is why we need to have an understanding of how bad our sin is and how much it offends God – if we understand that, our gratitude will be all the greater. And instead of the drudgery of trying to earn God's favour, we'll spend our lives serving him joyfully out of gratitude for what he's done!

In Romans 6 St. Paul tells us twice that we have died with Christ. Because of our union with our Saviour, not only has our guilt been forgiven, but sin's rule in our lives has been broken. This is true for every believer and it's accomplished in full from the moment of our redemption,

when God delivered each of us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his Son (Col. 1:13).

If we're in Christ, we're dead to sin. It's done and it's done forever. We can't add to or subtract from it. But at the same time, St. Paul also urges us to "let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions" (Rom. 6:12). The reality we experience daily is that sin is still at work in us. So why is that if we're dead to sin? The problem is that while Christ's work has dethroned sin in our lives – we've put Jesus on the throne – sin still does everything it can to shove Jesus off and put itself back on. It'll never happen, but that doesn't stop sin from trying! Paul describes it as spiritual warfare:

The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (Gal. 5:17)

We struggle daily, even sometimes so much that we wonder if the Gospel really does break sin's dominion. I think this is especially true when we look at the more respectable sins in our lives. They can be so subtle and so tenacious that we have to battle them daily – maybe even hourly. We think we've turned the corner and are winning the tide, and then a few days later we stumble and fall back into that sin. I know there are times I've wanted to ask Paul, "Okay, so if sin no longer has dominion, why am I struggling to progress in this battle against sin? What's your answer, Paul?"

Well, St. Paul does have an answer in Galatians 5:16: "I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." The key is to "walk by the Spirit." That means we need to do two things. First, we need to continually expose our minds to and seek to obey the Spirit's moral will for us as he has revealed it in Holy Scripture. And second, we need to live totally dependent on him through prayer, continually crying out to him for his power to enable us to obey his will.

What this leads us to is the understanding that we are both dependent on the Spirit and at the same time responsible to him. He has an obligation before God to obey his Word and to put to death the sins in

our lives. But at the same time, we don't have the ability within ourselves to fulfil that obligation. We're totally dependent on the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. And that's why God fills us with his Spirit at the moment that we receive the Gospel message and have faith in Jesus Christ. It's this infilling of the Spirit that brings the Gospel's power into our lives. Without it we'd be merely forgiven, but still under the dominion of sin. God promised his Spirit, his Helper, his Comforter, the One Who Comes Alongside to make us more than conquerors. That's part of the Gospel promise and it's comes immediately and freely when we make Jesus Christ our Lord and Master.

That Spirit does three things for us as he fills us and helps us to conform to the image of Christ. First, he convicts us of sin. Our lives are full of it, but it takes the bright searchlight of the Spirit for us to see it sometimes, even when it's obvious and right in front of us. Sometimes the Spirit works through his inspired written Word. Paul wrote to Timothy that the Scriptures are good for reproof and for correction. He also works through our conscience, but that means that first our conscience must be informed by that same inspired Word. This is why it's so important that we be a people that study the Bible. If you feel like you don't know God, the Bible is the first place to go. It's his book and his chosen means to tell us about himself. But it's also just as true that if you want to know right and wrong, you need to be daily in his Word. Your conscience is only as good as what you put into it. If you steep it in the philosophy of the world long enough, you'll stifle the Spirit's voice there, but steep it in Scripture and the Spirit will use it to speak God's truth to you. Sometimes the Holy Spirit shows us our sins by putting us in circumstances that single them out for us and that sometimes show us the whole sinful pattern of behaviour that fosters them.

The second thing the Spirit does is enable and empower us to deal with our sin. St. Paul exhorted the Romans: "*by the Spirit* put to death the deeds of the body." And he wrote to the Philippians saying, "work out your own salvation...for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13). He's not calling us to work on our own. He's calling us to work, confident in the

knowledge that God is already at work in us. Maybe most importantly, St. Paul gives us these reassuring words in Philippians: “I can do all things *through him who strengthens me*” (4:13).

And finally, the Spirit works in us through our circumstances. I think this is especially apparent when we understand that God is sovereign over all things. Nothing happens by chance. And so the next time you’re in a difficult situation, consider that it may be the Spirit’s work, giving you the chance to exercise some spiritual muscle. Just like our physical muscles, our spiritual muscles atrophy if they aren’t used. And so the Spirit puts us in places that give us the chance to overcome evil by his power.

You know the old saying, “Never ask God for patience.” It’s funny, because we know how in granting us patience, God usually teaches it to us rather than instantly bestowing it on us – he puts us in circumstances that teach us how to exercise this particular fruit of the Spirit. But the same is true with overcoming many sins. If we struggle with anger, the Spirit may just repeatedly put you in situations that test you and expose the sinful pattern that leads to that kind of anger. St. James reminds us that God never tempts us to sin, but it doesn’t mean he won’t work with us to overcome sin through that temptation.

Romans 8:28 is a familiar passage that gives us comfort in difficult circumstances: We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” But often we fail to read on. That “good” that St. Paul writes about is defined in the next verse: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined *to be conformed to the image of his Son.*” The good that God is working for in us is our own conformity to the image of Jesus Christ. So the next time you find yourself in a circumstance where you’re tempted to sin – especially when the same circumstance keeps coming up repeatedly and often – stop and think about how the Spirit may be helping you to deal with that specific sin.

So, to sum up, the Spirit does three things for us: he works in us to convict us of sin, he works in us to enable us to put those sins to death, and he works through

circumstances to exercise us in the activity of dealing with sin. The Spirit works in us giving us the power to overcome sin, but that’s just it – he works with us. We have an obligation to work with him. We’re not called to just sit back and let God sanctify us and make us holy.

But lest we sin by becoming prideful in our Spirit-enabled victory over sin, we need to remember that the Spirit does more than just help us – he is the one directing our spiritual transformation.

Remember the words of that hymn written by Augustus Toplady:

Be of sin the *double cure*,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.

God delivers us from both the guilt of our sin *and* its power.

Please pray with me: Our Father in heaven, we thank you for the gift of your Son. We thank you that while we were deep in our sins – enemies of you and your Kingdom – you sent your Son to die in our place so that we could be reconciled to you. Help us to remember, Father, that Jesus is the double cure – that he not only cleanses us from sin’s guilt, but that he also removes its power that we may serve you in joyful gratitude. In his cleansing name we pray. Amen.