

December 2017

Dear neighbours,

Do your sins bother you? Possibly not. But if they do it's not something you can easily share with another. You are on your own. If conscience troubles, it is between you and your Father which is in heaven. No one else can enter there. No one else can meddle with your thoughts. They are between you and Him. You are, rather like jurors, locked together; but locked in with Him who knows all our thoughts, words, actions, feelings. There is no way out until it's sorted.

It is the beginning of a narrow road. "Strait (ie narrow) is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7.14). At the point of entry you are on your own.

When I was diagnosed with prostate cancer I heard the news alone with the consultant. I didn't know anyone who had what I had. And then, all of a sudden, it seemed that "everybody" had it and wanted to share their experiences. It is lonely to begin to be afflicted with you know not what. Then there is the sheer solitariness of diagnosis and prognosis. The outlook is bleak.

That bleak outlook is an essential ingredient to coming to terms with the affliction. Without it we'll likely pretend it isn't there, or will go away. But when it comes to treatment or even hospice we do meet others, at least before it gets too bad, to go through it with.

In conscience matters, the matter of dealing with sin, it is no different. We must begin alone. We must and may enter into the presence of our heavenly Father. There is no cure without first admitting our sins. We might try to argue within ourselves that they are not as bad as first thought. It won't wash in the holy presence of our heavenly Father. We might try to admit some things and not others. But, like cancer, it will all come back if not thoroughly got rid of. We must repent, to the extent of forsaking them as much as lies within us, and that may prove a major battle before we even start.

Until these things are over and done with we are on our own with God. The cure cannot begin until then. We may be at the narrow gate but we are not yet on the narrow way where we may enjoy the shared experiences of others.

Human nature, almost without exception, when faced with sin and its consequences will tend to respond, "It wasn't me" or, next stage, "I won't do it again." Often that's simply a ruse to get an uncomfortable matter over and done with as quickly as possible, to get rid of our accuser and hope he will take our word for it. It doesn't go to the root of the matter and not long down the line we'll be in the same position again.

We say to ourselves (or to God) that we will try harder. But, try as hard as we will, it soon becomes apparent that it doesn't solve our problem. There is still that tap root of sin within us. We can't get rid of it. If we give up the unequal task and say to our heavenly Father, "I'll do the best I can and you will just have to accept that," He won't settle with you for that. He is perfect and will only accept perfection. You can't provide it. So there's impasse - until God provides the way, as we shall see.

You would not be the first to go through something like this, nor will you be the last. It is the indispensable entrance experience that cannot be avoided and you are on your own with your Maker.

Martin Luther was one who went through these experiences. He had his set of experiences, and you have yours, but in principle the matter is the same. He thought, he studied (particularly the Bible), and nearly went off the rails in his mad attempts to shake off his concerns. But all to no avail. Until...

Until he discovered the key. He found it in Romans 1.17 and tried it. This key says, "therein (ie in the gospel) is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith." The full passage is, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth;...for therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith."

Those words, "the righteousness of God revealed" got hold of him and wouldn't let him go.

All along what he had been trying to do (as we do) is to find ways of justifying his behaviour before God. But, as the Bible says, “all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isaiah 64.6) and we look like wretched urchins to Him. We need to be changed, washed, born again, and re clothed to be fit to appear before Him. Our heavenly Father provides all that. It’s all down to Him.

Righteousness means justice. When Paul reasoned with a Roman governor in preaching the gospel of “righteousness, temperance (mastery over one’s passions), and judgment to come” (Acts 24.25) that leader trembled, but left it at that, unresolved to face that judgment day.

What is that way, that only way? It begins with the gospel of Jesus Christ and ends with eternal life.

In the gospel, God’s way (in contradistinction to our own inventions) is revealed. He has sent His own Son in human flesh as “the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Colossians 2.9), totally perfect as God, and totally perfect (ie without any sin) as man. All people are under the curse of death and, after death, the judgment. Precisely to meet this situation the Lord Jesus Christ was sent. By His undeserved death (for He had no sin) He bore the sin of all those who turn to Him in faith, who repent and confess their sin, by taking their place once and for all by dying a death on their behalf. “As it is appointed to men once to die, but after this the judgment: so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many” (Hebrews 9.27-28).

Those who believe are pronounced “not guilty” or, if you like, justified. They are now set free in conscience, obviously with a responsibility to live as a disciple of the One who saved them. God, our heavenly Father, accounts them as Christ’s very own and being in Him partaking of His life. His perfections are counted to them. Like a newborn baby – complete but not what will one day appear.

Because this is God’s chosen way of salvation it does, in fact, actually remove guilt, cleanse the conscience, set the soul free and release you into the beginnings of everlasting life, here and in glory. Jesus says, “I am the way the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me” (John 14).

“I have seen an end of all perfection” (Psalm 119.96) says the psalmist. Quite so. None in himself, so he must not unreasonably expect it of others. None in others. None in corporate or national affairs. But Christ is **the** end of all perfection, the fulfilment in Himself of perfect selfhood. All those who are in Him have that privilege of belonging to Him and sharing that perfection. Righteousness is imputed (counted) “if we believe on him that raised up our Lord Jesus from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification” (Romans 4.22-25).

“God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3.16).

Yours affectionately,

Michael Harley