

“Once Is Enough”

Hebrews 9:24-28

November 11, 2012

24th Sunday After Pentecost

One of the topics raised in the election last week was the national debt. How will we reduce it? How can we possibly pay it off? As big as that debt is, it is easy to set it aside and forget about it. You have more pressing problems to pay attention to such as your personal or family debt. There are two problems connected with personal debt. First, do you have enough money to pay your present debts? Prices are high and wages are low so having sufficient funds is always a concern. Secondly, will you be able to continue to make payments on your debt in the future? Rarely do people have enough cash to pay for big ticket items out right. So, when you buy something like a car or a house, you have to make payments month after month and year after year.

Similar questions arise when we consider our indebtedness to God. So often we think of sin lightly. We think of it as being merely a moral blemish, a mistake, or an inappropriate choice when, in fact, it indicates a debt to God. As creatures of a Creator God, we owe Him perfect obedience. If you come into this world holy and live a perfectly holy life according to the Ten Commandments, most people would think you have done something exemplary. The fact of the matter is that, if you were able to do that, you would be merely even with God who requires holiness.

When we fail in obedience to His holy will, we are in debt to God. We owe him a debt for that sin which must be paid. Since Scripture declares and experience shows that no one is remotely close to being holy, that means all of us are in serious debt to God. And so the same two questions which arise in the financial realm come up in the spiritual realm as well. Do we have enough capital to pay this debt? And, since we keep on sinning daily, can we continue to make payments on our spiritual debt month after month and year after year?

Our text for today describes the sacrificial system in the Old Testament which God set up to deal with this problem. The high priest would enter the holy of holies on one day of the year – the

Day of Atonement – and make a sacrifice for the sin of the people of Israel. The payment would be made in blood. However, it couldn't be the blood of the high priest (who was himself a sinner in need of atonement like anyone else). It would be an animal sacrifice with the blood of a bull, sheep, or goat which was perfect and without blemish. This payment would be made for the sin of the people. It would be made year after year after year. In addition to that, as the men in the Men's Bible Study group on Wednesday who are studying the book of Leviticus know other sin offerings and guilt sacrifices would be made weekly and sometimes daily. I'm sure the question still arose. Would that blood be enough to make payment for sin? Would that payment be able to be made year after year?

If we take our sin seriously enough and truly recognize the holiness of God, there is still doubt about those questions for us. We know that Jesus died on the cross because of our sin and shed His blood as a sacrifice and payment for that sin. However, is it enough? Is our sin paid for? With our propensity for sinning, will that sacrifice pay for our sin tomorrow, next week, next year, or farther down the line?

Because of those questions and doubts, we often think that we have to add something to that payment to make it enough. For some Christians, there is the idea that, if you are a real Christian, then you will reduce your sinning and do more good. You may not be able to become completely holy and out of debt with God, but you can lessen the sinning and keep your debt from getting any higher.

In addition to that, there may be the thought that, even though you cannot fully pay for your sin before God, you can contribute to the payment for that sin. In Roman Catholic piety and theology, the Lord's Supper was that means. It was seen as a bloodless re-sacrificing of Christ's body and blood by the priest on behalf the Church to God as payment for sin. One of the most famous Catholic theologians, Thomas Aquinas, wrote this about the Lord's Supper: "The body of the Lord, once offered on the cross for the original debt, is daily offered on the altar for daily offenses so that in this the church might have a service that reconciles God." (Ap XXIV, p.260 in Tappert)

Luther and the Reformers strenuously objected to this and we, their spiritual heirs, would never go along with this today. However, we may think attending Church, receiving Holy Communion, going to Bible Class, learning our Confirmation memory work, or other religious activities are our spiritual sacrifices to God, earning brownie points with Him and maybe paying off a teeny bit of our debt to God.

I have news for you (and for me as well). We cannot keep our debt from going up by doing good things. We will always out-sin our good-deed-doing. We cannot make even partial payment for our debt because our best religious piety and practices are always tainted by sin. So we must ask again: Can something that happened 2,000 years ago and 8,000 miles away on a cross outside of Jerusalem on the hill of Golgotha really pay for our sins? In light of our continual sin, will it be enough to pay for our sin in the weeks, months, and years ahead?

The book of Hebrews was written to compare the Old Testament sacrificial system with the work of Jesus Christ in the New Testament and to show the superiority of the Gospel over the Law of Moses. The animal sacrifices were never ends in and of themselves. They were done with the explicit purpose of pointing to the finality and superiority of the sacrifice of Christ.

There are three things that make Christ's sacrifice on the cross and payment for sin superior to the Old Testament sacrificial system. First, the sacrifice of Christ is a one time event. He makes a sacrifice which only needs to be offered once - not yearly, not monthly, not weekly, not daily – but once.

Secondly the sacrifice of Christ is one that is done for all. The high priest would make the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement for the nation of Israel and no one else. The sacrifices spelled out in Leviticus were made by individuals for themselves and heads of families for their families – and no one else. Jesus' sacrifice is sufficient, not only for the nation of Israel and not only for the people who lived at that time, but for all people – you, me, everyone who has lived, lives now, or ever will live.

Our text says, “he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.”

And that’s the third thing: the content of the sacrifice. The high priest sacrificed the blood of an innocent animal. But the blood of any animal, no matter how unblemished and pure it might be, cannot remove sin. It was one huge object lesson which pointed to Christ, the sinless and perfect Son of God, who could make the sufficient sacrifice for sin that would be enough for all. John the Baptist recognized this and proclaimed it early on in Jesus’ ministry when he said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” His life sacrificed and His blood shed on the cross once would be enough to pay for the sins of all. As He neared death, having perfectly obeyed the Law of God on our behalf and sufficiently suffering the wrath of God against our sin, Jesus confidently proclaimed, “It is finished!” (John 19:30) It is completed! It is paid in full! Everything that needs to be done for everyone has been done in this one event. Jesus would not have to be sacrificed again and again. He has done it all for everyone. God the Father showed that to be true by raising Jesus from the dead on Easter morning, never to die again.

Imagine if you were able to live without ever being in debt and a guaranteed amount of money to pay for all your indebtedness in the future. Wouldn’t that be a wonderful thing? Some might be tempted to abuse this great gift by buying more and more stuff to test the generosity of the one supplying payment. But without doing that, you can live a life of great happiness and contentment being out of past debt and never in future debt, right?

We live now without being in debt to God at all. Our sin has been paid for. Some might abuse God’s grace and think this is a wonderful opportunity to sin as much as we want to since it is all paid for. But this is wrong. Paul addresses this in Romans 6 when he asks with great astonishment, “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” (Rom. 6:1,2) We have died with Christ and our sin has been

buried with Him in the tomb in our baptism. We have been resurrected to a new life in that baptism.

How can we even consider wanting to return to that sin?

Instead, we can live lives of great freedom and peace. No matter what your debt to God has been in the past – no matter how many sins or how serious those sins seem to be – that debt has been paid in full. There is no reason for you to live lives plagued with guilt. It has been removed from your record before God.

There is no need to worry or fret when you screw up and sin now. Satan will accuse you and try to get you to believe that you are hopeless. You sin too much. You cannot think that you are sons and daughters of God because of all the bad you so willingly do and all the good you so easily refuse to do. But you are living life with an unlimited supply of forgiveness. The Lord's Supper is not a re-sacrificing of Christ. Rather, it is a continuous distribution of what Christ gained for you by being sacrificed on the cross: forgiveness, life, and salvation. Even if you don't willfully sin and abuse grace, each person in this church will still sin. Every week, you can receive God's forgiveness when it is put in your ear through the voice of the pastor speaking absolution and when it is put in your mouth through the hand of the pastor giving you Jesus' body and blood in the bread and the wine.

There is no need to fear the future either. The debt which has been paid in the past by Christ on the cross, the benefits of which you receive now through Word and Sacrament, will still be paid in the future. The debt has been paid in full for all time. The only thing to occupy our thoughts about the future is the return of our Benefactor. The author of Hebrews says, "Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

My father had congestive heart failure and was on medication for it from the time he was in his early twenties. Since the medication was so expensive, he once asked his doctor, "How long will I have to be on these pills?" The doctor replied, "All your life." My father said, "How long will that be?" The doctor said, "As long as you take your pills." So many things are like that. You have to do things

repetitively in order to gain a benefit and the benefit could cease if the action is not continued.

Thankfully, that is not the case in our relationship with God. It is not on a day to day basis, depending on how we live and what we do. Jesus' action for us in being offered as a sacrifice for sin is not something that needs to be done repeatedly. The benefits Jesus won – forgiveness, life, and salvation – will never run out in the future. Christ died for the sins of all and rose from the dead for the life of all. He did it once and once is enough! Amen.