



The Separating Sins

**Sermons Presented By Stephen McIntyre
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Is anybody out there pals with the Pope? Have you talked with him on the phone lately? Had breakfast with him? Gone camping with him? Knows him personally, intimately? He could be from another planet, he is so far away. Yet there are multitudes that accept him as "the vicar of Christ," God's vice-president on earth.

Jesus is closer to you than that. Yet to many people, He seems far-distant, like some great celebrity, and certainly not having a close connection with them. The Bible insists that He is very close to us. Hebrews 2:9-18 describes Him as closer to us than a blood-sibling, closer than parents can ever be, one who knows all our intimate conversations but never betrays our confidence, Someone "made in all things like unto" us who is an Intimate - as it were - so close that no English words can describe the relationship properly: "...a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people." (Hebrews 2:17 This high priest to you is like your physician, except it is like you are the only patient he has. He is the physician of your soul, one who understands your secret feelings. Heb. 4:15 says "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." Jesus is compassionate, but never soft with you, never excuses you for wrong doing but holds you to a high standard because He loves you. He reasons from cause to effect, is compassionate as well as firm with you. The best Friend you will ever have.

The victory that took place in Him was given to us, and it now is realized in us when we choose to

exercise faith in Him. Christ died for us over two thousand years ago, and stamped our debt "paid." But did He complete His work then, so that now He is on "vacation"? Has He left us to get along as best we can? The answer of course is No; He has sent the Holy Spirit. We are not like cars with full gas tanks so that we run on our own. We are like a trolley that must keep in contact with the power line or it stops. The Good News is that the power still flows through the line.

A great religious system involving millions of people is based on the assumption that a certain clergyman has been appointed "the vicar of Christ" on earth. The idea is that when Christ went away to heaven, He had to find someone to manage His business on earth. The supposed successors of St. Peter have usurped the honor.

It is correct that Christ needs a "vicar" on earth to carry on His business; but it is not correct to say that a fallible, mortal man can do it. Christ said that His divinely appointed "vicar" is the Holy Spirit Himself: "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. 26. But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you." (John 14:16-18, 26).

In the flesh, Christ could not be in all places at the same time, but through the Holy Spirit He abides so closely with every believer that the early disciples who walked and talked with Him could not have been closer than you are. This is why He said, "Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you." (John 16:7). Alcoholics want to stop drinking but don't know how. Thieves, embezzlers, addicts, and gluttons are terribly ashamed, and wish they knew how never to indulge again. How do we overcome the inner compulsion of evil?

We soon learn that trying to be better or making promises will not help. We are like the sons and daughters of a great king who have been taken slaves in a Roman war of conquest, and are helpless captives longing for release. Jesus says, "...Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin." (John 8:34). Sin has alienated us from our best Friend, making us think things about Him that are not true. Colossians 1:21 - "And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled."

Paul said, "For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I." (Rom. 7:14, 15). What a war to have raging inside us! And

continuing now in verses 20, 22 and 23 - "Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members." Then Paul cries out in verse 24 - like we all do, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

What is this "death"? Romans 6:23 - "For the wages of sin is death....." (Rom. 6:23). Who wants "wages" like that? Some do, because Jesus says in Proverbs 8:36, "...all they that hate me love death." (Prov. 8:36). But we, like Paul, cry out, "Who is there to rescue me?"

Paul gives the answer in Romans 7:25 and 8:1: "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.....There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." A stronger power than sin takes over when we stop resisting the Holy Spirit-the "life-giving law of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit rules the heart and overmasters the evil that used to drag us down. If that's not true, there is no hope for any human being. But it is true.

Paul goes on to explain in Romans 8: 3-4 that what Christ did for us two thousand years ago the Holy Spirit now does in us: "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

If you had an enemy constantly trying to kill you, wouldn't you be happy if he were "condemned" in a court of law and locked up? That is what happens to sin, in our flesh. Jesus was sent in the likeness of our "sinful flesh," met temptation as we must meet it, got under our load, and conquered sin right there within our own flesh or sinful nature. Let me illustrate.

Suppose a father tells his little child to take a hammer and drive a big nail into a piece of hard wood. The child tries, but fails. The hammer is too heavy, the nail is too big, and the wood is too hard. Where is the weakness? Shall the father throw the hammer away? No, you say, the hammer is all right; the weakness is in the child's flesh. Now, let the father take the child's arm in his own, grasp the hammer tightly with the child's hand, hold the nail firmly-the nail is easily driven into the wood.

Let the "hammer" be the law of God. Although Paul says "the law is weak," it is not weak in itself; it is only "weak through the flesh." Whose? Yours and mine. God solves the problem by sending Jesus "in the likeness of sinful flesh," and right there "condemning sin in the flesh." The victory that took place in Him was given to us, and it now is realized in us when we choose to exercise faith in Him.

Long ago, God has already done this for us in Christ; now the Holy Spirit makes it effective in us. He convicts us of the righteousness of Christ (see John 16:8-11). But what is His "righteousness"? It was perfected "in the likeness of sinful flesh." In His flesh Jesus had a battle as we have. He was "... in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." (Heb. 4:15). He took our nature upon Himself, "...made of the seed of David according to the flesh" (Rom. 1:3). In Hebrews chapter 2 we read "For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren. 14 Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; 16 For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. 17 Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. 18 For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted." (Heb. 2:11, 14, 16-18).

Therefore, you are never to feel that you are on your own. No temptation can come to you that Christ has not already conquered "in the flesh," that is, your flesh. No matter how far into sin you have fallen, Christ's arm is long enough to reach where you are. From now on there is no excuse for any sin. Even this deep alienation from God that we feel, Christ has taken and abolished: "And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies

in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled 22 In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreproveable in his sight." (Col. 1:21, 22). The devil will tell you, "That's too much Good News-don't believe it."

What is our part? It is to consent to be led by the Holy Spirit. Like the little child who permitted his father to unite his weakness to his strength and drive the nail into the hard wood, so we permit Christ to work "... in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight..." (Heb. 13:21). But Can I Really Be Set Free? Someone may say, "Please don't tell me something that isn't really true!"

This weakness of my flesh that the Bible calls 'the law of sin and death' is too strong for me. Is there a 'life-giving law of the Spirit' that will really set me free?" Yes, for Paul exclaims in Romans 1:16 "For I am not ashamed of the

gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." The angel said of Him, "...thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins." (Matt. 1:21). Note, not in their sins. That would be a mockery, like telling a man he is free when chains still bind him.

You have seen the power of lightning, shattering a giant tree and splintering it to slivers. The true gospel of Christ shatters this "law of sin" in us. "Yes," someone says, "I have seen how lightning strikes and what it does. But I have never felt this power strike me! How can I know there is power in the gospel of Christ to break the bonds of sin that have held me?"

"For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world;" (Titus 2:11,12). When we choose to "walk after the Spirit," to let Him hold us by the hand, His power works within us. And anyone can come to Christ just as he is and let the Holy Spirit hold him by the hand; he does not have to try to make himself better first.

The power is in the cross of Christ. No one can rightly tell its glories. "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world." (Gal.6:14). What is "the world [that] has been crucified unto me"? John tells us: it is "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life..." (1 John 2:16) which is all around us and in us. Now look at the power of the cross: "the world" is stricken dead, "crucified," made nothing, even made abhorrent, to us. All the world's allurements are nullified by the greater glory of the cross.

You may say, "How can that be? Everybody loves the world, material-ism, money, pleasure!" Paul once loved it, but he discovered something of greater power that delivered him from it. Let me illustrate. A little child has been lost in a big crowd in the city. He can't find his mother. A kind policeman tries to comfort him with soda pop, ice cream, and candy, which the child normally loves. But even if a stranger should give him all the candy in the world, he could not be happy. Suddenly he sees his mother. He throws away the soda pop and ice cream and comes running to meet the one he loves more than anything else in the world.

All the pleasures of sin become to us no more than soda pop to such a child when we "see" Jesus on that cross. "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 4:9, 10).

What the world calls "glory" becomes distasteful in contrast. " But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my

Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:" (Phil. 3:7-9).

Very hungry people sometimes eat leather and sawdust for want of something better. We "eat" sin because we are starved for the true love of God. Nothing else has such power to draw people. Jesus said in John 12:32 - "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."

A Scottish girl left the home of her shepherd father and lost herself in the sinful big city. Like some young women in today's big cities, she became a prostitute. Her anguished father waited long for her return. Finally he went to the city and walked up and down its dark streets, sounding his familiar shepherd's call so that his lost daughter would hear. One night while she was in a house of sin, she heard the call of her dear old father outside. With tears in her eyes, she rushed outside to meet him. She could not resist that call of love.

If we do not resist the love of Christ revealed at His cross, we will be drawn to Him. The Holy Spirit will give us the precious gift of repentance, a true heart sorrow for sin itself. God has exalted Christ with "...his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins." (Acts 5:31).

Romans 2:4 "...the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance" (Rom. 2:4). This is illustrated in a man who committed crime after crime in an effort to cover up his first mistake. Worst of all, he did nothing to prevent an innocent man from being sent to prison when he himself should have been the one jailed. As so often happens to a criminal, he lost his sense of fairness and kindness, and his wife and children left him. His home was ruined. Yet that hard-hearted man would not repent. He insisted: "I cannot, I will not, I dare not, I must not!"

Finally the innocent man who was wrongfully in prison did an unusual thing. He wrote the hardhearted man a letter, forgiving him for all the wrong he had done to him. Can you imagine? That letter broke the heart of that evil man and brought him to repentance and confession of his crimes. He said, "All the troubles that came to me failed to bring me to repentance; but when I was forgiven, I repented." Fear can never drive you to be a better person, but realizing that you are forgiven-that does it.

Sometimes sick people need something more than medicine. Mark chapter 2 verses 1-12 relates the story of a man sick of the palsy. One day he was brought to Jesus. His four friends had to break up the tile roof in order to lay him down at His feet. The sufferer did not ask for anything, not even healing. When Jesus saw him, He recognized that he was suffering from guilt. He said, "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee."

Oh, how that poor man's face shone with happiness and peace! Now he was not afraid to die, for the awful burden that had been crushing out his life was lifted. But Jesus took another step. He commanded the sufferer to pick up his bed and walk away (see Mark 2:1-12).

Being "born again" is not a do-it-yourself project. "6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 8 The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not

tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." (John 3:6, 8).

One cannot know when or how the Holy Spirit first began to work on his heart. The "wind" is forever blowing seeds of heavenly truth into minds and hearts. No one is wise enough to tell where they come from, for the grace of God has been working on human hearts in multitudinous ways ever since time began. What parents have said, friends, songs of praise, Bible messages heard or read, sermons, expressions of true love-all can be ways that the Holy Spirit uses to plant "Good News" ideas in the heart.

The seed of truth was sown. These "seeds" may lie there deep, unrecognized for years, but they are certain to germinate because each one has within itself the mysterious principle of eternal life. Each "seed" of Good News truth "... is the power of God unto salvation ..." (Rom. 1:16). Here is another illustration of how the divine word of truth accomplishes its purpose: "For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: 11 So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it." Isaiah 55:10, 11

Christ's illustration of the wind blowing "wherever it pleases" is a picture of God's compassionate concern for every person. As surely as you have felt the wind blowing on your cheek, so surely is the Holy Spirit trying to convert you. "...God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34).

It's exciting, for at times you can almost feel those seeds of truth germinating within your soul like a pregnant woman can feel the baby growing within her. She is thrilled with new life forming. What greater joy to experience something even more wonderful-"I'm being born again!"

But if the new birth is so easy, why isn't everybody born again? The answer is clear: many, perhaps the majority, practice a form of new-birth-abortion. They are endlessly snuffing out the new life that the Spirit of God imparts. This is disclosed in Stephen's words to the Jewish leaders of his day. They were only doing what comes naturally to unconverted human nature: "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye." (Acts 7:51).

It's active alienation or enmity against God. It doesn't make sense to do that, but let's face reality-that's what we do. It's like starving people diligently uprooting every little food-bearing plant that comes up out of the ground. It's crazy! Jesus told a parable to illustrate the fate that most of His seeds of truth meet. "And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow; 4 And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up: 5 Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: 6 And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. 7 And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them:" (Matthew 13:3-7).

He went on to explain His story. The farmer represents Himself, sowing His seeds of "Good News" truth in all human hearts everywhere through the work of the Holy Spirit, the "wind." But, He says, "For

this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed...." (verse 15). It's no use sowing seed in earth packed beneath the tread of multitudes in the path. Even if plenty of seeds fall on hard hearts, they cannot take root.

"But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold." Jesus continues in Matthew 13:23 - "But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it.... (Matthew 13:8, 23). He is the one who believes the Good News, who receives it, welcomes it, cherishes it.

He lets it get into his heart instead of inviting the birds by the wayside to snatch it up, or letting the thorns choke it out, or leaving hidden "rocks" of cherished lust to dwarf its roots. He simply does not perform an abortion of unbelief to kill it. This is a Good News view of Jesus' parable.

No one has yet seen what is the dynamic factor that produces the new birth, because love can never be seen. Jesus told Nicodemus in advance the story of His cross, which of course he couldn't understand that night. But what he heard stayed deep in his mind until he saw what happened; then it all came together, and he stepped out of his closet to identify openly with Christ.

Jesus explained further: "13 And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: 15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:13-15).

He alludes to something that happened during Israel's wilderness wanderings. The people were journeying through the desert to their Promised Land (yes, there were hardships). But true to form for all of us humans, they had to make their difficulties worse by believing bad news: "4 And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. 5 And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread."

(Numbers 21:4, 5). They were not about to die, for God was leading them; this was a specter of doom that they themselves invoked, without reason. Psalm 105:37 states, "37 He brought them forth also with silver and gold: and there was not one feeble person among their tribes." Their doubt became pure unbelief, borrowing troubles that were only figments of their faithless imagination. But to do so was sin.

The people's sinful unbelief and murmuring had deprived them of God's special protection which would have been theirs by right. Moses' making a snake of brass and holding it up high on a pole was an acted prophecy of Christ to be uplifted on His cross.

"8 And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. 9 And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived." (Numbers 21:8, 9).

But how could a poisonous snake represent Him? Here is the answer: He was "made . to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21, KJV).

We see how close Christ has come to us. He never sinned, but He identified with us so closely that He "took" our fallen, sinful nature. He was "made" to be something that He was not. In that reality is our salvation from the "serpents."

Note how easy the healing was: all the people had to do was look. Jesus is telling Nicodemus: there is something to see on that cross-look. But it is more than gazing at a crucifix. "Looking" is believing in the sense of a heart appreciation of what it cost the One who died there to "be made sin for us," and save us. (It meant that He died the death that we have deserved.)

An appreciation of what He did is what brings healing to a sin-sick person. And, of course, healing is exactly the same as that new birth. Then Jesus spoke the well-known words that have become the most loved verse of the entire Bible: "For 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). Obviously, the power is in the One on that cross, not in its wooden beams. How can believing or appreciating God's act of loving and giving do anything to change sinful hearts?

One of Christ's followers made it clear how it worked for him. He expresses it as a principle that operates in everyone who will look and say, "Thank You" for what He accomplished. Paul was defending himself against the charge that his all-out devotion to Christ was virtual insanity. He was going through incredible hardships and persecutions for Christ's sake, but almost incredibly, he sang for joy as he went along.

The idea that he was sacrificing anything seems not to have crossed his mind. On and on he went through scourgings (and one lethal stoning!), imprisonments, fastings, cold and nakedness, shipwrecks, hunger, weariness. His career as a missionary went on for decades, even into old age. Why not restrain his self-sacrificing devotion, and settle down and enjoy a well-earned retirement? Wasn't it time for Paul to begin looking out for "number one"?

No, not for him. He says: "13 For whether we be beside ourselves, it is to God: or whether we be sober, it is for your cause. 14 For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all

dead: 15 And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again." (2 Corinthians 5:13-15).

Here we see what it has seemed impossible to understand. Paul was not a better person than we are, nor more heroic. He simply saw something that made all his sacrifices easy: He saw that he would be in a hopeless grave if that "One" had not died in his place. He saw that even his next breath he owed to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. He saw himself a slave bought by love, responding to the blood shed there. He saw that nothing he possessed he could count as really his.

Let it come into your heart. Let it take root. Don't practice abortion on it. Cherish it. Plead with God with all your soul for His gift of faith. He has promised to give you every tiny bit that you are willing to cherish.

There can be no such thing as bad news unless we ask for it, or choose it, and thus willfully bring on ourselves a final verdict of choosing darkness after we have seen Light.