

Communion

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[0 : 0 0] Could you turn back with me to that passage that we read in 1 John, and particularly some words in verse 7? 1 John verse 7, But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son purifies us from all sin. The blood of Jesus His Son purifies us or cleanses us from all sin.

Oh, happy day when Jesus washed my sins away. That was a 1967 gospel song by the Edwin Hawkins singers. It reached number two in the UK charts, and in fact it was the first hymn to cross over into the pop market, and since then it's become a gospel classic, being recorded by hundreds of artists. There's something about that language that still resonates with people. We want to be clean, we want to be cleansed. Bruce Springsteen in a song, Racing in the Street, says, Tonight my baby and me, we're going to ride to the sea and wash these sins off our hands.

But will the sea, will the deepest ocean even, really wash these sins off our hands? I think not. Whatever remedy we try, we still have this longing to be clean. You try to take your mind off it, perhaps, you socialize, you work hard, you drink too much, you try to do good, you try to atone, but none of it is really any good. We still long to be clean. I want to think with you first about this longing to be clean. That is a background to our text here. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin, because it is a common human experience, this feeling of somehow being dirty, contaminated. Bob Dylan, in one of his songs, No Time to Think, says, Stripped of all virtue as you crawl through the dirt you can give but you cannot receive.

This idea of just being in the dirt, somehow contaminated. Or there's a song by Nine Inch Nails called Hurt, where it says, You can have it all, my empire of dirt. I will let you down, I will make you hurt. The whole idea there of dirt being linked up with moral corruption, in the sense, I will let you down, I will make you hurt. Albert Camus, who was a French existentialist author, in one of his very striking books called The Fall, which is interesting because The Fall, of course, is a theological concept as well. It's a book all about guilt, and yet the problem of guilt is framed in such a way that the man, the kind of hero or anti-hero of the book, can never get rid of this guilt. And in it, he says this, I am inclined to see religion as a huge laundering venture, as it was once but briefly for exactly three years, and it wasn't called religion. Since then, soap has been lacking, our faces are dirty, and we wipe one another's noses. He's speaking there, of course, about the Lord Jesus Christ's ministry of three years, and speaking in a way kind of admiringly of it, but feeling that it's of no relevance now. That doesn't work anymore.

So we can't escape this feeling, whether we look at literature or music or whatever it is, we see that there's this feeling that something is wrong, that we are somehow contaminated. Sometimes it's a vague feeling, sometimes it's a very strong feeling. The singer-songwriter Tori Amos, in a song called Crucify, says, I've been looking for a savior in these dirty streets, looking for a savior beneath these dirty sheets. Got enough guilt to start my own religion. Please be, save me. I cry, and my heart is sick of being in chains. We can go back in history to Shakespeare's Macbeth. Lady Macbeth, there in the play, imagines that she sees spots of King Duncan's blood on her hands, because she and her husband are guilty for the death of King Duncan. And she's plagued by guilt. She feels contaminated. She says, all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. And Macbeth himself appeals on the behalf of his wife for some sweet, oblivious antidote, but there is none. So what is it that's wrong? What is it that contaminates us? What is it that makes us feel filthy and dirty and unclean?

[4 : 57] Well, it's what the Bible calls sin. And that is not just the nasty little things we've done to hurt other people or the good things that we've not done to help them. But it's the fact that we rebel against God. We disregard his law and we fail to respond to his love. It's this that makes us feel guilty, that contaminates us, that makes us feel unclean. But although we may feel it in our heart of hearts, we don't like to be reminded of it. We pretend everything is all right, and we resent generally being called sinners. But here we read in this passage, if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves. It's not very striking. It's really a self-deception if we say we're really not guilty, we're really not sinners. There's an old Sicilian proverb that says, only your real friends will tell you when your face is dirty. And that's what God is telling us. He's telling us this, not just our faces are dirty, but our hearts are dirty. He's reminding us of this, not because he hates us, but because he's approaching us as our friend. It's not because he wants to wield power over us, as sometimes today religion is viewed as just another way in which people manipulate other people.

It's because God is our friend, and he loves us, and he tells us the truth about ourselves. But is there any hope? Is that all the message of the Bible, that we've got dirty hearts that were contaminated? Is there some antidote, as Macbeth put it? Is there some savior in these dirty streets, as Tori Amos put it? If there was a huge laundering venture for three years, 2,000 years ago, as Albert Camus said, why not now? Well, the message here of this passage is indeed that there is an answer. And we look next at the love that makes us clean. John in this letter tells us about that huge laundering venture. He tells us about this love that makes us clean. And he emphasizes here that he was an eyewitness to this. In verses 1 and 2, that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at, and our hands have touched, this we proclaim concerning the word of life. The life appeared. We have seen it and testify to it.

And we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. Here's John speaking as an eyewitness, not just an eyewitness, but we may say a touch witness. He says, I touch Jesus.

He's real. He lived in this world. And we are witnesses of these things. Jesus, the word of life. Jesus, as he calls him here, the eternal life. He's the one who is the answer. And how is he the answer?

It is because it is a great message of love concerning Jesus Christ that is the transforming power. Later on in this letter, in chapter 4, verses 9 and 10, John says, this is how God showed his love among us.

[8 : 25] He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin.

This great message of love that John is revealing here in his letter, it is an undeserved love. You know how there's this word that was used specifically in the New Testament to describe this great love of God in Jesus Christ, the word *agape*. And it's a word that was not kind of commonly used. It was there, obviously, in the Greek language, but it was a kind of undeserved love, the kind of love of a philanthropist to somebody in need, that kind of idea. It wasn't the love of friendship, but it wasn't the usual kinds of words that were used for love. But the New Testament writers selected this word and indeed added to its meaning by showing that the work of the Lord Jesus Christ perfectly fulfills this word because it's a love that's wholly undeserved by us. We can't earn it.

It's not because we have some special relationship with God. It's not because we have done great things that God loves us. We don't deserve any of it, but God in his great grace shows us the love freely.

You don't deserve this love. You can't earn this love. You can't merit this love. It is freely and generously given. And at the heart of this love, there is what's called here in verse 7, the blood of Jesus.

It is not just God's love, but it is God's love expressed in this specific way that is the way by which our sin and guilt is cleansed. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. Now, at first sight, this seems a very alien concept to us today, all this emphasis upon the blood of Jesus. It's something that puts people off from the Bible as they read of this kind of thing. It seems very, very primitive. But it was Jesus himself who started it. We're going tomorrow to remember the Lord's death. And Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as a means for us to remember that great fact.

[10 : 55] And as he did so, he said, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. So, whatever it is, it is absolutely essential to what Christianity is because Jesus himself taught it. And there's no way that people can kind of pin it on the Apostle Paul or someone else that developed Christianity in a way that was different from what Jesus intended. The words of Jesus make it clear it was his purpose that he should give his life, that he should shed his blood for our salvation. Blood shed to us is almost wholly a negative thing. It usually refers to the unnecessary or reprehensible loss of life.

We think of murder. We think of people taking someone else's life, blood being shed. But of course, it's not totally used in that kind of sense. What about the soldier who throws himself on a grenade to save his comrades? He's killed. His blood is shed. But we honor such self-sacrifice. Tomorrow, Remembrance Sunday, we'll be remembering all the self-sacrifice of people who gave their lives for our freedom and the freedom of others. And so, we can see that the shedding of blood can be something tremendous, something liberating, something that we honor. And it's in that sense that it is used in Scripture. John Muir, who's a famous naturalist, he was actually born in Dunbar, and with his family. He emigrated out to North America. And there, through his travels throughout the West in Alaska and other places, he became one of the sort of key thinkers in terms of how we look after the natural world. And he's very much revered today. He wrote a book called *Travels in Alaska*.

He was traveling there in 1879 into 1880. And I read this book not all that long ago, and in it, there's something very striking about this question of the atoning death of Jesus. He tells of a custom amongst the Thlinket tribes that made them ready to accept the Christian gospel, because as Christian missionaries came amongst them, it was as if they were prepared for the central part of the gospel concerning the death of Christ. They understood atonement. And he gave an example of this.

Two tribes were at war, the Stikin and the Sitka, to the extent that normal life was disrupted, and they were starving. The Stikin chief came and stood between the fortified camps and offered peace.

But the Sitka chief said that the Stikin had killed ten more of his men than they had killed. And then the Stikin chief offered himself to be killed in order to make peace. This was accepted, and he was killed, and there was peace. Now, we might think that is very bloodthirsty, but it made them aware of this concept of someone sacrificing themselves for peace.

[14 : 33] And this is exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ did. He gave himself as the sacrifice in our place so that there would be peace between God and man because his death would cleanse away sin.

This is at a far greater and higher level than any human being has done in any of these other contexts. He has made peace between God and man. But why has that peace to be made? That, again, is a stumbling block for many people today. People think they can just decide to be pals with God if they decide to do it. If the time is right to do it, they can just do it. Why can't God just let bygones be bygones be bygones, just as human beings would be encouraged to do? Well, it is because of our sin. It's because of our filthiness. God cannot accept sin. It is utterly contrary to his nature.

And more than that, God is actually angry at sin, and he's angry at sinners. This is the basis of the Greek word behind the word atoning sacrifice as it's translated here in chapter 2, verse 2.

It's the older word propitiation, which could be translated really quite accurately by the phrase turning aside God's anger by taking away sin. Because you see, at the back of all of this, it's not just that sin is something that harms us. God is angry against it, and God's anger must be placated. He must be propitiated. Today, we resent this idea, again, of God's anger, that God should be angry with us. If anything, people talk in terms that we have grounds for being angry against God.

You know, people talk in those kind of terms. Now, why does God allow this, and why does God allow that? But if God is God, then what he thinks of us is far more important than what we think of him.

[16 : 41] His judgment of us, far more solemn than our judgment of him. His anger at us, far more significant than any anger of ours against him. This is the reason for the blood of Jesus.

Our law-breaking is an offense against the justice of God, our filthiness, offense against his holiness. It's an offense that must be dealt with if there is to be peace, and we can't deal with it.

We can't remove the offense. We can't remove our own filthiness. But God himself has dealt with it through Jesus, his son. He's the one who stepped forward, who sacrificed himself so that there would be peace. His blood, we're told, cleanses from all sin. His blood, that is his death on the cross, cleanses or purifies us from sin. Notice it says not will cleanse some indefinite time in the future, or might cleanse, or anything like that. It says it does cleanse. It's not that you think of this, this may happen in some time in the future, maybe when you come to die, or whatever it is. No, it's now. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from sin right now. If we walk in the light, if we come into the light, if we have our sins exposed and confess them, as it says in verse 9, we are forgiven and purified right now. But notice also there's a continuous element to this, because the tense of the verb that's used here, yes, it is present. But in the Greek language, it's what's called present continuous. That is, it means the blood of Jesus is cleansing us from all sin. So, you can know this cleansing not only now, but you can know it the next moment and the next moment. It's a continuous thing.

It's something that is available to us constantly, and we know that it must be, because as long as we are in this life, as long as we are in this body, there will be sin. Notice too, that it is a complete work that Jesus did. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin, or from every sin.

That's the stress here. Sometimes we think, well, what so-and-so has done is so bad, God could never forgive that. Or sometimes we turn it on ourselves, and we think, how can God forgive me for this?

[19 : 28] Well, think of all the different kinds of sin that we read of in the Bible that God forgave. The cursing and swearing and denial of Peter when he disowned his Lord. The blood of Jesus Christ cleansed away that sin. Or the selfish ambition of James and John, who asked to sit at the right and the left hand of Jesus in his glory. The blood of Jesus Christ cleansed away that self-centered ambition. Or think of in the Old Testament, David's adultery with Bathsheba, and then organizing the murder of her husband. Penis sin, filthy sin, and yet the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses away that sin.

Think of the cruelty and persecution of Saul of Tarsus, who was standing there approving when Stephen was stoned to death, and all the others that he put in prison and perhaps had murdered as well.

The blood of Jesus Christ cleansed from all those sins. Or the Philippian jailer's attempted suicide as he despaired of life, thinking his prisoners had escaped. The blood of Jesus Christ cleansed from that sin. Because the intention was there in his heart, and that's as bad as the act itself, isn't it?

Or what about the violence of the terrorist crucified with Jesus, who was mocking Jesus, but then the next minute was saying, wait a minute, this man has done nothing wrong. We deserve what we're getting. This man has done nothing wrong. And he says, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And Jesus says, today you'll be with me in paradise. The blood of Jesus cleanses away that sin. If God has forgiven all these sins, how can your sin be too big or too bad to be cleansed and forgiven?

[21 : 31] The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin. What do you think that your sin deserves? Exposure, ostracism, ostracism, derision, judgment, condemnation? Well, Jesus took all of these in our place and more.

He took the full wages of sin, which is death. And that wasn't just physical death, but it was spiritual death as he experienced alienation from God the Father. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

But it's because Jesus took all that that our sin is paid for, that our sin is cleansed away when we trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and when we walk in his ways. It's only the blood of Jesus that can cleanse us from all sin. Graham Greene in his book, *The Power and the Glory*, said, It was for this world that Christ had died. The more evil you saw and heard about you, the greater the glory lay around that death. It was too easy to die for what was good or beautiful, for home or children or civilization. It needed a God to die for the half-hearted and the corrupt.

Very penetrating thought there. You know, it's one thing to die for a good man, as the Apostle Paul says, but it was while we were yet sinners that Christ died for us. Desmond Tutu, South African bishop, said, Without forgiveness, there's no future. And we have no future until we realize we need forgiveness and we need cleansing, and it's only the blood of Jesus that can provide it.

Dak Hammersholt, who at one time was the General Secretary of the UN, said, Forgiveness is the answer to the child's dream of a miracle, by which what is broken is made whole again. What is soiled is again made clean. And that's what we desire in our heart of hearts, to be made clean. And the blood of Jesus is the only thing that can make us clean.

[23 : 43] Do you feel this need for forgiveness, this need for cleansing? Well, in the words of Bob Dillon's, when he returns, Surrender your crown on this blood-stained ground. Take off your mask.

He sees your deeds. He knows your needs, even before you ask. How long can you falsify and deny what is real? How long can you hate yourself for the weakness you conceal? Surrender your crown on this blood-stained ground. Let's pray.