

**Altavista Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“The Apostles’ Creed,  
Part IX”  
Leviticus 4:27-31  
I Corinthians 15:42-49**

**Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time  
June 3, 2018**

**Leviticus 4:27-31**

If anyone of the common people sins unintentionally in doing any one of the things that by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done, and realizes his guilt, or the sin which he has committed is made known to him, he shall bring for his offering a goat, a female without blemish, for his sin which he has committed. And he shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and kill the sin offering in the place of burnt offering. And the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out all the rest of its blood at the base of the altar. And all its fat he shall remove, as the fat is removed from the peace offerings, and the priest shall burn it on the altar for a pleasing aroma to the Lord. And the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven.

**I Corinthians 15:42-49**

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

**"The Apostles' Creed, Part IX"**

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This is it, folks. We've made it to the end of our series on the Apostles' Creed. Last week we looked at the three articles concerning *the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church, and the communion of saints*. Today, we will wrap up our series by discussing what it means to believe in *the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting*.

Forgiveness is one of the central tenets of the Christian faith. And we love it! Go to any church and ask what people feel about forgiveness and you'll likely find a lot of positive responses. We love the idea of forgiveness. I know I would much rather be forgiven than punished. And indeed, forgiveness is an extremely important doctrine within the plan of salvation. But because it is so well loved and so central to faith, it is easy to see it through tunnel vision or, worse, simplify it to an unbiblical level. I just compared forgiveness to its parallel opposite, which is punishment. Both of these words, when speaking biblically, are legal or courtroom words. Since this is a legal term, forgiveness is hard to understand without knowing more about biblical legalese. To gain full significance of forgiveness, we must first understand the meaning of guilt.

In most of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Western society, judicial systems work under the presupposition that a person is judged guilty or innocent of a particular infraction to society's laws. For instance, when someone is found guilty of hiding income on their tax report, the infraction is called tax evasion.

When someone is found guilty of receiving social security benefits for a child not under their care, the infraction is called fraud. These are hard and fast laws that, when broken, incur a legal guilt on a person. Now, many societies and cultures also have unwritten laws that, when broken, may not incur legal guilt, but may incur social guilt. All of this shows us that guilt, and by extension forgiveness, involve the wider question of human relationships. This is evident in the titles of many court cases: *Commonwealth of Virginia v. John Doe*, *Smith v. Jones*, *Jane Doe v. X Company*. Relationships are broken and people use the legal system to make amends and to find out who is guilty of the infraction. Now, in a perfect world, relationships would never be broken. People would never hurt, wound, or even annoy others. But last I checked, we don't live in such a world. Relationships are broken all the time. Some naturally mend, others require third-party interventions, all incur guilt.

Now, I do want to say a brief word about the language of guilt. There is an important difference between legal guilt and guilty feelings. Legal guilt is an objective status imposed by a moral authority. When speaking of human relationships, sometimes moral authorities may be wrong. Such as laws that are set in place to disenfranchise based on race, nationality, or gender, for instance. But in healthy legal relationships, the imposition of guilt is *always* objective. Guilty feelings, on the other hand, are subjective. They are based on an individual's *perception* of guilt. Let me use an illustration. Imagine a guy who grew up in a house that was opposed to pencils. Everything was written in pen, for whatever reason. One day, this guy is at the library and he needs to take a note. The only thing he can find to write with is a pencil. Reluctantly he uses it. And from henceforth he feels guilty for breaking his own moral law. Now we know there's nothing illegal about using pencils, but for this man there is. Thus, he incurs a personal sense of guilt while remaining legally innocent of any law. The opposite can also be true. Say there's a lady who, for whatever reason, loves to cheat people out of their money. She hops from town to town using snake oil tactics. But one day she swindles the wrong person: the town's deputy mayor. She's arrested, tried, and found guilty of stealing. Yet, psychologically, this woman remains unremorseful. She hasn't any feelings of guilt, while still being legally guilty. So, we have to be careful when talking and thinking about guilt.

Biblically speaking, guilt is *always* legal and objective. Unfortunately, the human race is guilty of a broken relationship with God. Whether individually or corporeally, all humans are, to some degree or another and at some point or another, in a broken relationship with God. One might ask, "Why am I even in a relationship with God? I don't believe in him, why should I be guilty?" The truth is we all are *inescapably* involved in a relationship with God. A person may despise that relationship or even deny it exists, but no one can destroy the relationship. We are all in a relationship with God by the very nature of his being Creator. From the devout atheist to the devout church-goer, each of us is in a relationship with God. The relationship may be negative or positive, but it is nevertheless a relationship. Now, this inescapable relationship is covenantal in its nature. Meaning, we, as created beings, have moral obligations and responsibilities to our Creator. Humanity's privileged status in creation carries with it an enormous burden of moral responsibility to God, to neighbor, and to the cosmos. This is why it's truly hard to be a Christian.

For those who openly deny such a relationship even exists, their guilt is clear. But even those who welcome and follow this relationship, even we sin and fall short of God's glory. Meaning even believers can be guilty of broken relationships. We are responsible to God for our behavior toward

him. God created us and we owe him our allegiance, our reverence, and our obedience. We are responsible to God for our behavior toward others. The whole human race is created by God, and as Calvin puts it, any abuse or offense against our fellow man is also against God, in whose image he is created. And we are responsible to God for our behavior toward the cosmos. This world is God's creation, too, and he placed our ancestors in the Garden to be its stewards. To exploit, trample, and endanger this creation is to be guilty of poor stewardship.

Because of this vast web of relationships, at some point or another and to some degree or another, we will all be guilty of breaking our relationship with God, our neighbor, and the world. This is huge. And since God is also our Judge as well as Creator, he is well within his rights to be upset with us for breaking these relationships. The whole human race is legally and really guilty before God's eyes. This means God is completely fair when he exhibits punishments against our race. I know it's unpopular to talk about God's wrath. I don't like talking about it either. But we cannot ignore the fact that we are guilty nor can we ignore that God is not wrong nor cruel nor unfair when he punishes and condemns souls for these infractions. Now, I am sure some of you are already thinking about Jesus Christ. And yes, you are on the right track. Jesus died to win for us the forgiveness of our guilt. Because of the cross, we are no longer *legally* guilty before God's eyes. But we are still sinful. We are still *really* guilty. Our sins are not erased by the blood of Christ. Rather, our sins are *covered* by the blood. That's a semantic difference, but an important one. To believe in the forgiveness of sins is not to believe once saved always saved. We are still responsible to God for our actions. God still wants us to turn from our sins and sinful ways. There are things God finds abhorrent, and we are still responsible for staying away from those things. To believe in the forgiveness of sins is to believe that the Christian is forgiven of her legal status of guilt and to believe she is now expected to turn from her sinful ways to a new life in Christ Jesus.

This leads me nicely into the next article of the creed, *the resurrection of the body*. What forgiveness affords the Christian is a bodily resurrection into heavenly glory. I mentioned in another sermon that our death is no longer a payment for a debt but a transition from a life of sin to a life of glory. That transition is made possible through resurrection. And our resurrection is only possible because of the resurrection of Christ. His resurrection wins for us our future resurrection. As Paul mentions elsewhere, we have been united with Christ in death like his, and so shall we be united with him in a resurrection like his.

But what is resurrection? First, I'll tell you what it's not. It's not reincarnation. That is not a Judeo-Christian concept. At the point of death, a person's soul does not reenter the system to be eventually deposited into another body. Reincarnation sees the soul as an eternal entity that gets passed down from generation to generation. That is not the case for Christians. My soul has not existed since the point of creation and trickled down through history to this point. Rather, God creates each individual soul at the moment of conception. It is only at that point that the soul becomes an immortal entity, meaning the soul cannot be destroyed save by God himself. Resurrection is also not annihilation. There are some who hold the view that upon death, the person ceases to be. Our existence is only from the point of birth to the point of death. This is clearly not a view supported by Scripture. There is life after death, and that life is eternal.

We know this because Christ came to us from heaven. He is the eternal Word of God, who's existed with God since before time. In verse forty-nine of our New Testament lesson, Paul says

“we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven,” meaning we shall have an eternal nature and life just like Christ enjoys right now. But before we can enjoy such eternity, we must first set aside the mortal. As descendants of the first Adam and heirs of his fallen nature, we cannot inherit the kingdom of God in our current state. Therefore, death becomes a transition from one life to another.

Now, another question about the resurrection concerns the added phrase *of the body*. Again, we turn to Paul for clarification. For the Apostle, believers will experience a real, bodily resurrection. This is the reason why, historically, Christians have always buried their dead. It isn't until recently that Christians began okay-ing cremations. For centuries, Christians have asserted that a burial must include the body and this comes from Paul's assertion of a bodily resurrection. Truthfully, since God created our earthly bodies, he can create heavenly ones too, so I don't think there's any theological reason to debate burial versus cremation. The reason I believe this can also be found in Paul.

A few verses before our lesson for this morning, Paul draws on a metaphor from nature. In verse thirty-seven he talks about when we plant a seed in the ground, the plant that grows from it looks totally different than the seed which went in. Think about it. The acorn looks nothing like the oak tree. So it will be with our resurrected bodies. “What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.” There are real and carnal differences between the earthly body and the resurrected body, but it is nonetheless a body. Now, I personally really like Paul's imagery here. In fact, this is my go-to Scripture for funerals. In death, the body is sown, whether in burial, cremation, or lost at sea. And, like a seed, it will transform from a broken, perishable body to a spiritual, imperishable body at the resurrection. This is what we believe when we confess in the resurrection of the body.

The final article of the Apostles' Creed affirms the *life everlasting*. This is intimately tied with the previous article, for an imperishable and spiritual resurrection is not for a short time or for a specific time. Resurrection is for eternity. And the Christian isn't resurrected into a state of un-death or half-life, but to full life. In heaven, the faithful are made whole and able to enjoy God's presence eternally. Heaven is a place where the faithful will get what they longed for on earth: perfect union and communion with God. In heaven there will be no separation between God and his people. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the church will walk with God, talk with God, and worship God directly. As Paul says elsewhere, what we have here is a dim and foggy reflection in a mirror. When the church gets to heaven, all of the faithful of every time and place will see clearly and perfectly the glory and majesty of the Lord. This is what it means to believe in the life everlasting.

Before I wrap up this series, I do want to deposit a few things for you to ponder. The Apostles' Creed says a lot about our faith and is a great summary of Christian doctrine. But the creed also leaves out quite a bit. Notice it says nothing about the redemptive history of Israel. No mention of the patriarchs, prophets, and kings. No mention of God's covenant with the Israelites, their deliverance from their enemies, their constant deceit against God, and God's steadfastness to his promise. The only Old Testament reference is in the description of God as “maker of heaven and earth.” This tells us the concern of the authors was strictly the nature of Jesus Christ, for whom six lengthy articles are dedicated. But even that is incomplete. There's no mention of his life, of his

work, of his baptism, nor even of the Last Supper. The creed jumps from birth to passion. It skips right over important aspects of Jesus' teaching and commands. This, again, tells me the focus of the authors was Jesus' nature and not his ministry.

And oddly enough, the creed makes no mention of our human response to God. Nothing about repentance. Nothing about fruit of the Spirit. Nothing about sanctification. These are important for a life of faith, yet we see such living is not the intention of these authors. The Apostles' Creed is beautiful, but it is not perfect and far from completely covering Christian doctrine. This is the very reason why the Bible is to be our true lens. I love our creeds and confessions. They are wonderful expositions of Scripture. But they are just that, expositions. They are not God's Word and they are not complete. If you learn anything from this series, let it be this: study your Bible. Read it daily. If you find it confusing or difficult, first pray, then seek out helps. Whether that be as a Bible study group or a reputable commentary. But read it. Absorb it. May it be the spectacles through which you see the world. And you'll be amazed at the difference it makes in your life.

Let us pray. Holy God, we give you all thanks and praise for sending your Holy Spirit into this world to guide, counsel, and correct us. We are so appreciative of the forgiveness of our sins that our only response is obedience to your commands. As we wait for the day of our resurrection, may we be moved each and every day to bear witness to your love and your Word. And may this living Word be ever on our minds and in our hearts. May we never forget your Scripture and may we be guided by your words therein. In the blessed and holy name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.