

Propitiation: Your Mess, His Sacrifice

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Matthew 5:23-24 ²³ "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ "leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Look at all that trash. That is in one of our national parks. It is pretty sad to find piles of trash like that, but how does it get there? It's not one person who comes and decides to dump a bunch of trash in a park. Rather one person throws a bottle down. It does not seem like such a big deal. It is just one bottle. And then another and another until it is a big deal and you have a pile of garbage.

To clean up that mess someone must be willing to make a sacrifice. Ideally it would be the people who made the mess, but we all know that is unlikely to happen.

We have a word for that, sacrificing to clean up someone else mess, that word is propitiation. That is what Jesus did for us. He didn't wait for us to clean up the mess we made, instead he made the sacrifice necessary to make peace, to clean up the mess.

We have a big pile of garbage in our church right now. How did it get here? Well, just like that pile of garbage it was not one person or one decision. Many people contributed a little. Somebody did not think it was a big deal to throw down one piece of garbage, and then another and another and another and another. There was gossip. There was a lack of trust. There was a lack of respect. All of it piled on top of another until it made a big mess. All of it started with a little gossip.

Gossip

A couple of weeks ago I was reading about a case in northern Canada. A man took a gun and shot into the window of a car that was full of people. The shot broke the window but miraculously did not hurt anyone inside the car. At least that is what all the witnesses swore in court happened. When the gun was examined, it quickly became evident that not only had the gun never been fired, but that it was not capable of being fired. The man hadn't shot the car window, only smashed it with the gun.

What that man did was still bad, but the point is that no matter what you think you saw, no matter what you think you know you could easily be wrong. This is one of the reasons why when you think someone has done something wrong you need to go and talk to them. You need to talk to them with an attitude that you might be the one who is wrong. No matter how certain you are about what you think you witnessed.

God's word is very clear about this.

Matthew 18:15 Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

When you think someone has done something wrong you go and talk to that person. You don't go and discuss it with other people.

Our text this morning is another passage that we don't talk about as much, but I think is in many ways more poignant on this point:

Matthew 5:23-24 "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift."

There are three things to take note of with this passage:

1. The question of who is at fault is immaterial to this passage. It doesn't matter whether it's your fault or his fault or both. It doesn't matter if he is mad or you are mad or both. If there is a rift you need to go talk to that person and find a way to reconcile.
2. Talk to him. Just like Matthew 18 the clear instruction is to go talk to the person you have a problem with. You are not supposed to stop on the way and gather a crowd to back you up.
3. Jesus says to leave your gift at the altar. It is more important to God that you find a way to make peace than that you give you gift. The passage says don't even come back to the temple until you have reconciled. This is more important to God than you coming to church.

The guy who throws that first bit of garbage in the park doesn't think he is really doing anything all that bad. In the same way when we talk about others behind their backs, we often also don't think it's really any big deal, but this is what God has to say about it:

Psalm 101:5 Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, Him I will destroy.

Just like all his commandments, so also with this one, God is very serious about this.

My brother Aaron and I were at an outdoor ice-skating rink. There was a clear sign posted saying "no chaining." No one else was on the rink so we did it anyway. The employee could clearly see what we were doing and just as clearly did not care. God doesn't wink at our disobedience. He means it when he says don't slander, don't gossip.

Proverbs 16:28 A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends.

Talking about people behind their backs, creates division and destroys trust and fellowship. Even if they never find out what you said, it still creates division and suspicion. Which by the way they usually do find out what you have said. Yet even if they don't know you do. That knowledge creates separation.

Talking to them builds relationships and binds you together. Even if the conversation is somewhat negative it is still more likely to build relationships, than talking about them behind their back. Anger is easier to forgive than it is to rebuild broken trust.

Anything of course can be taken to an extreme of absurdity. If you have good reason to believe your neighbor is a serial killer, you don't knock on his door and ask him if he has bodies in the freezer. You go and tell a police officer. However, that is only an extreme case.

The question of the right way to talk to them is a subject for a whole other sermon or bible class, I'm not going to get into that this morning.

Instead let's get back to our text:

Matthew 5:23-24 "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift."

What Jesus tells us to do in this text is exactly what he himself did. He himself, when he knew that there was a rift between us and him, when he knew that we were at enmity, that is at war with him, came down to reconcile us.

Jesus didn't sit around in heaven waiting for us to fix our ways. He didn't complain to the father about how it was all our fault, even though it was. He didn't go to find someone else to take care of the problem. He came and gave his life as the propitiation for our sins. That word propitiation means the sacrifice that was necessary to make peace. Making peace often requires sacrifice on our part, even if we are convinced that we are in the right.

Jesus himself knowing full well that he was in the right, gave up his life to make peace between us and him, in order to bring us back to him. His death has paid the penalty of our gossiping and all our other sins. Where our sins created division and strife, his blood healed the rift, bound us together and made us into the church, that we might have fellowship with him and with one another.

Jesus gave his life as the propitiation for our sins. What propitiation will give you to make peace with one another.