

2 Epiphany Sermon
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When I was a kid, even though it would only happen very VERY rarely, every once in awhile I did something I wasn't supposed to do—I picked on my little brother, or I played with my mom's glass figurines which we weren't allowed to touch. And because my parents wanted to teach me right from wrong, whenever I did something I wasn't supposed to do, there were repercussions. Maybe I wouldn't be allowed to watch TV for a while or I would have to do extra chores. Unlike other parents, the punishments that my siblings and I would get weren't really laid out and regimented. Probably because, and you could guess, I was such a good kid...and my siblings were mostly okay.

But I did notice that most of my friends had a different setup when it came to their parents punishing them. Most parents would give out fairly traditional punishments to kids we knew who had done something wrong. The child could be grounded, or lose phone privileges, or their video games may be locked away. But each of these punishments had a start and end time that corresponded with the severity of whatever offense the child had committed. Little Jimmy didn't turn in his homework? No videogames for a week. Little Suzie pushed another child on the playground? She's grounded for a month. This system is probably popular because it's similar to the American penal system, where people are sentenced to varying lengths of probation or prison time based on the offense.

However, there were some parents who doled out punishments differently. Rather than having punishments that simply lasted a set amount of time which the child needed to suffer through before regaining their full privileges, some parents took punishments in a different direction, insisting that, rather than simply waiting through their sentence, their children must do things in order to earn back their rights. Little Jimmy didn't turn in his homework? No videogames until he vacuumed the house, cleaned the car, and did the dishes. Little Suzie pushed another child on the playground? No having fun with her friends until she took out the trash, cleaned the bathrooms, and did the laundry. These parents didn't want their children to simply passively wait to earn their freedoms back, they wanted them to actively earn them—to be forced to sacrifice their time and energy towards something positive in order for their privileges to be restored.

This system isn't completely unfamiliar to us, as it is similar to the system followed in much of the Old Testament by the people of God. When the people of God built the temple, they were also given instructions as to rituals that were to be performed by people to obtain forgiveness of their sins. Depending on what commandment a person had broken, they were expected to travel to the temple, bringing an offering to sacrifice. This offering would be something like livestock or produce—something that the person had to work hard in order to grow or maintain. And because the offering was meant to be a sacrifice, someone who was wealthy and therefore could more easily maintain livestock and fields was expected to offer up more than someone of lesser means. So a poor man may be expected to bring a dove or some grain as an offering for sin, while a rich man may be expected to bring a bull. Once the offering was given at the temple and the ritual performed, the person's sins were considered to be absolved.

Yet there were some issues with this system. The first is that people, because they are not perfect, will continually sin. This meant that people had to continually offer sacrifices at the temple in order to obtain forgiveness. The other problem with this system is that, though it was meant to inspire repentance in those offering up the sacrifice, that didn't necessarily happen. There were people who would dutifully travel to the temple and offer up their sacrifice for sin in order to be absolved, only to travel back home and continue to commit the very same sin over and over again. Some didn't bother to repent, because they would rather go to the temple periodically with their offering than to actually change and try to better follow God's commandments. This is the kind of behavior that inspired the psalmist in today's psalm. "In sacrifice and offering you take no

pleasure..burnt-offering and sin-offering you have not required.”

These temple sacrifices were not necessarily required to repent of sins and gain forgiveness, and they certainly didn't guarantee that the person offering up a sacrifice was truly repentant. The true goal was not for people to offer up sacrifices for their own sake, but for the sacrifices to inspire people to stop sinning, to start living righteously, to follow the commandments of God. However, as I said before, people are not perfect, and therefore they continued to sin. And the problem with sin is that the natural consequence of sin is death. Our sinfulness and refusal/inability to follow the commandments of God draws us further and further away from God, who is eternal. And we are then naturally pulled further and further from eternal life.

However, because God does not withhold his compassion from us and his love and faithfulness keep us safe forever, God the Son became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man. Christ Jesus, as John attests in today's gospel reading, is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Unlike the sin offerings sacrificed in the temple, an offering which needed to be made over and over again as people continually sinned, Christ's sacrifice was different. The Lamb of God, through his sacrifice was able to destroy death, which is the consequence of sin, so that our sins can no longer separate us from God. Though we do not deserve or earn it, Christ has obtained forgiveness for our sins and opened to us the way of everlasting life. And this forgiveness is not something that must be renewed over and over again, but cuts across time and space.

Yes, Jesus, Lamb of God, has conquered sin and death, and our sins are forgiven. But just as was expected of those offering up livestock and produce in the temple, we, too are expected to continue to repent of our sins and continually work to follow God's commands. Because, through faith, we have received this amazing gifts, we are compelled, through faith, to live as God would have us live—to be kind, loving, merciful, and forgiving, remembering how the Lord our God has been kind, loving, merciful, and forgiving towards us. In this way we please God our creator, and in this way we testify to the world about the truth which has been made known to us—that Jesus, Lamb of God, has offered himself up as savior and redeemer of the entire world. For if we truly believe that Christ has redeemed us, we will seek to follow him in all that we do. May we shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth. Amen.