

Last week we noticed, among other things, that I take a perverse delight in using some less than festive images to summarize the reasons why Christ came. Last time the image was a rescue mission. You know, life boats, and fire trucks, and helicopters and so on rushing to the rescue of someone in deadly peril. That is what Christmas really means. That's what Paul said anyway. "Jesus Christ came into the world," 1 Timothy 1:15, "to save sinners of whom I am chief." He came to save sinners. It was a rescue mission. It was an act of heroic intervention to rescue sinners from their deadly condition and trajectory.

Well, this evening you will be pleased to know, I have another less than festive image for you. Not only does God's word understand Christ's coming among us, that first Christmas as in some sense a "rescue mission," it also understands it as a "demolition job."

The wonderfully Christmassy image I have in my head is of some huge, grey, concrete, sixties tower block, and men in hard hats high visibility tunics, with heavy machinery and cranes fitted with wrecking balls, and ultimately, of someone pushing down a lever and a series of charges exploding around the major structural supports so that the whole building collapses with a sudden billow of smoke and dust into utter and irreversible destruction.

Merry Christmas!

As strange as it may seem the Bible really does see the message of Christmas as a demolition job. Look with me at 1 John, chapter 3 and verse 8, "He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. *For this purpose Christ was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.*"

Why did Jesus come? What is Christmas really about? It is a demolition job. He came to bring down the whole structure of the devil's work. He came to reduce to rubble the works of Satan.

Now to help us see how John understands the significance of the demolition job Jesus came to perform, we need to look at the context a little. So look with me at verses 4-9. The passage is a wonderfully constructed sequence of parallels. It divides in half and each half makes three parallel statements.

So the first half, in verses 4-7, tell us about *sin's nature*—that's in verse 4, then about *Christ's work*—that's in verse 5, and finally about *lives transformed* in verses 6 and 7. And then in the second half, that whole structure is repeated. So in the first part of verse 8 we are back again at *sin's nature*. Then in the second half of the verse we are told about *Christ's work*, and then finally in verse 9 we learn once again about *lives transformed*. And so to help us get at John's point, I want to look at each of these parallel couplets in turn.

Look first of all at what John tells us here about *sin's nature* in verses 4 and 8a.

First, John tells us that sin's nature is *lawlessness*, verse 4: "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and *sin is lawlessness*." Sin is "any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God," our Catechism teaches us. God's holy character has been transcribed for us in His moral law, and sin is a contradiction of that holy character, which is why Paul says that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. He is saying the same thing John says in a different way. The glory of God is the moral character of God shining out in all its radiance and purity. To fall short of the glory of God is to fall short of the standard of His character.

God's law reveals our sin. It is a standard that constantly says "God is holy. *You-are-not*."

Then John says that sin has its roots in the rebellion of the devil. Verse 8, "He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning."

Now there is an issue here about what John means when he says, "He who sins is of the devil." Is he implying that *any time anyone ever* commits sin he is "of the devil" and cannot, therefore, be a Christian? Clearly not, since he has already admitted that Christians do and will sin, back in chapter 1:8 "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Not only is John saying that Christians *do* sin, he is saying *more* than that. He is saying that if anyone suggests that they are or can ever be sin free in this life they are liars. *They* are the ones who reveal that the truth is not in them.

So whatever John means in 3:8 he cannot mean that anyone who sins is not a Christian. So what does he mean? John's point is that anyone who embraces life that is patterned after the devil's life, where sin is the habitual rule and the cherished norm, rather than the grief inducing anomaly that breaks our hearts, such a person reveals that they belong to the one they imitate. The devil, John says, has been sinning from the beginning. Now Satan's origins are obscure. We know he is an angelic being created

by God, and that he has rebelled against God. He is evil and in opposition to God. From the beginning of our history Satan was sinning against God's rule and rejecting God's law. He is *the* lawless one. He is anti-law embodied. He hates the rule of God. And John says that a life marked by habitual and embraced sin is a life ensnared by the devil.

Now there are two dangers to beware of as we deal with this whole subject of the devil. First, there is the danger of discounting him altogether, or of so minimizing him that he never figures in our thinking at all as Christians. We are, after all, modern enlightened people. What use have we for devils and goblins and spooky things that go bump in the night? That is all superstitious nonsense, right? How delighted the devil is with us when we think that way! He is happy to have us all disbelieve in him. No enemy is ever more effective in waging a war than when he goes unnoticed and unlooked for. Or maybe you tacitly recognize his existence but never pay any attention to the dangers he presents? You are quietly getting along with the hard work of trying to live for Jesus and being godly and raising your family and being faithful in the work environment. And you never think of the devil at all.

Well, let me say that that is not the stance of the Bible. Satan is real and he hates you. He wants to bring you down. He will do whatever it takes to disrupt your growth in grace and distract your faith. Your sinful natures have a powerful ally in their relentless war with godliness in your hearts. His name is the devil. And we need to be on guard and constantly clothe ourselves with the armor of God that having done all, when the evil day comes, we may stand firm. As 1 Peter 5:8 reminds us, we must "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." Be on your guard!

The other extreme, of course, is to obsess about the devil. There are Christians out there who seem to think Satan is omnipresent and omnipotent. He is everywhere and able to do anything. Not so. Satan is not God's opposite number. God and Satan are not equally balanced opposing forces. The devil, as Martin Luther wonderfully put it, is *God's* devil! He is under the rule and governance and ultimately will face the justice of the sovereign God of glory. And so we need to exercise caution in ascribing things to the devil that are more often the products of the wickedness of our own sinful hearts.

So John begins with a focus on the nature of sin. That is, if you like, the *crisis*. That is the *problem* to be resolved. We are sinners. It is a pervasive habit and attitude

of lawlessness that occupies our very souls. And sin has its ally, the devil, who is the great sinner, and the one who opposes all growth in godliness.

But then secondly, John moves on to deal with the work of Christ. Here's the *solution* to the crisis, the *answer* to the problem. Look with me at verse 5, first of all. "And you know that He (that is, Christ) was manifested *to take away our sins*, and in Him is no sin."

The reason Christ came, the reason He was manifested or revealed, was to deal with our sin problem. If verse 4 says our problem is rebellion against God, lawlessness, Jesus the sinless One, came to remove our sins from us. Now how did He do that? John is building here on something he had said earlier in his letter, back in chapter 2:1-2, "if anyone sins we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world."

Jesus is the propitiation for our sins, that is, He is the atoning sacrifice that satisfies the wrath of God on our sin. He atones for the guilt of our sin. He settles the divine lawsuit against us by making full payment for our crimes against the law of God. On the Cross, Jesus bore our guilt and sin as though it were His own and the full penalty of our transgression rolled down upon Him instead of us. There the fires of heavenly wrath spent themselves in exacting from our Substitute satisfaction for *our* offenses.

But there is more to it even than that. John hints at it when he says that Jesus was revealed to take our sins away and *in Him is no sin*. Isn't that a curious conclusion to the statement? Why is it important to know that Jesus is sinless and sin free?

Part of the answer is that His sinlessness qualifies Him to make atonement for sinners. Only a sinless sacrifice could be acceptable to God. But there is something else. I think part of John's point is that Jesus is sinless for us. He takes our sins away not merely by dying to pay their penalty, but by living to replace their offence with His obedience. The sinless one overwrites our sinfulness and lawlessness with the record of His perfect obedience and law keeping. Jesus was the antithesis of a rebel against God's rule. As we run to Christ for refuge, we cling to His cross to atone for our guilt and His life to robe us with His righteousness.

God requires more of us than a not guilty verdict. He requires a verdict of "righteous." That is what justification means. We are justified by faith alone in Christ alone. When God justifies us, we are declared righteous in His sight only for the

righteousness of Christ imputed or reckoned to us. We are counted righteous in Christ. His merits are looked upon as though they were ours and our demerits and sins are imputed to Him and He atones for them by His sacrificial death.

That is the heart of the Christian gospel. And John is saying that this is the reason why Jesus came. He came to take our sins away. He came to die. Good Friday and Easter Sunday provide the real meaning for Christmas. He was born to live the life we could not live and die the death we could not die that we might be accepted with God by grace alone through faith alone in Him alone.

But then look down at the second part of John's explanation of the work of Christ. If the problem has two parts—sin is lawlessness and sin is Satanic—then the solution also has two parts. Christ came to take sins away and Christ came to destroy the devil's works.

Verse 8, "He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. For this purpose Christ was manifested, *that He might destroy the works of the devil.*"

Here is the demolition job we've been talking about. Jesus came, He was manifested, He was revealed, He stepped onto the scene of history with *this* goal in view. He came to destroy the devil's works. That was His objective.

But how did He do it? Two passages help us here I think. The first of them is Hebrews 2:14, "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil."

You see what that is saying? Jesus became a man, He shared the same nature with us, He was born as one of us, flesh and blood that first Christmas, *so that* "through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is the devil."

Ever since Satan deceived our first parents and death entered the world, he has used the killing power of sin to plague human experience. Since the Fall, the fear of death has been one of his great weapons in the torment of human beings. As Richard Phillips put it, "Death is the problem from which we must be saved. Death is the rod of Satan's rule and the source of his laughter at our expense." (Phillips, *Hebrews*, 77)

But Jesus entered death Himself. He died under sin's curse. But He had no sin of His own. And death could not hold Him. Rising in victory over death Satan's rod was

broken and all those for whom he died have their sins atoned for. Their guilt is forever gone...because He died. Satan no longer has claim upon us.

The second passage makes the same point. In Colossians 2:14 Paul says that “having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.”

Once again the Cross is the focus. The cross wipes out the written requirements of the law that was against us. It accused us and condemned us as guilty sinners. But Jesus paid the price the law demanded so that it no longer accuses and condemns. The principalities and powers in verse 15 are a reference to Satan and his minions. By taking the condemning power of the law away, He disarms them. They have no weapon against us. They can no longer accuse and condemn any whose sins have been washed clean by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So you see the way that Jesus gets His demolition job done? He does it by the very same act in which our guilt is atoned for and our condemnation removed. He does it by the cross. The cross is Christ’s wrecking ball that smashes through the superstructure of Satan’s empire. The Cross is the lever that explodes the charges and collapses the devil’s works.

The point of Christmas, dear friends, is to stop the devil from winning. This Jesus accomplished when nails were driven into His hands and feet and the wrath of God fell on Him instead of you. In that moment the scheme of Satan failed and you were rescued from the destruction he had planned for you.

And then finally notice what John says about the implications of the work of Christ. We’ve seen the problem: sin’s nature in verses 4 and 8. We’ve seen the solution: Christ’s work in verses 5 and 8. And now, finally, here’s the effect: lives are transformed, in verses 6 and 7, and 9. Look at the passage please. “Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor knows Him. Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous.” And verse 9, “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in Him; and He cannot sin, because He has been born of God.”

Now in the light of these verses, some have taught that what John means is that, if we abide in Christ, we will arrive a degree of Christian holiness—in this life—that is sin free. The problem with that view is that the parallel passage in verse 9 makes it very plain that every single Christian is in view, not just those who abide in Christ as some sort of conscious deliberate discipline. “Whoever has been born of God,” John says, “does not sin.” Which, if we were to continue to read the passage this way, would require us to teach that just to be a Christian at all is to be sin free, which is patently not true and a clear contradiction of chapter 1:8 which says that Christians do sin.

No, the best explanation for John’s language is that the sin a Christian cannot commit is habitual and persistent sin. The tenses of the verbs in verse 6 and verse 9 here are important. They are all present tense. John is not saying whoever abides in Him, or whoever has been born of God, sinned in the past, but no longer today. What John says is that Christians are unable to continue in the pattern and habit of sin. They are changed forever from the old life.

And notice that in these verses there are two sources for this change of life in us. The first is abiding in Christ. “Whoever abides in Him does not sin,” verse 7, “he who practices righteousness is righteous even as He is righteous.” Out of our union with Christ comes holiness of life. The righteousness of Jesus Christ becomes our righteousness, really and personally as a result of our connection with him. Then secondly, verse 9 says holiness comes from the new birth, “Whoever is born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.”

Christians are people who are united to Christ the righteous one. They are people who have been given new spiritual life. They have been born again. Their natures have changed. They are new creations. Because those two things are true, sin no longer fits in their lives. They don’t live that way anymore. That is not who they are.

It is like a family who adopts a teenager from a troubled background. This child is difficult and acts out in ways that are inappropriate and disruptive. So the father takes him aside and lovingly but firmly explains that “we do not act like that in this family.” Now at one level, of course, the father is patently incorrect. This boy just *did* act like that in the family. But that is not what he means at all. He means that this family will not tolerate behavior that is incompatible with the way it *ordinarily* behaves. It means that this family *customarily* lives according to certain norms, and

when a member of the family acts differently, they are acting *uncharacteristically*, in a way quite out of accord with the family's nature.

And that is what John is saying about us here. Because Christ came to destroy the devil's works, because He was born and died as one of us, because of the Cross, because of Christmas, and because of Easter, all who believe in Jesus must now live differently.

There is no other way for them to be. That is what marks out the family. That is what characterizes Christians. Sure, they do from time to time live in uncharacteristic ways, but their natures have changed. They have been born again. They are living in union, now, with the righteous One Himself. *That* is who they really are now.

All of which means that, for us, Christmas is tremendous good news, as we struggle with sin. It tells us that because of the virgin birth, and the Baby of Bethlehem, Satan's works have been destroyed. Because of the man Christ Jesus, who was born to die in our place, a new life is possible. It means that out of union with Christ, flowing from our new birth, comes power to say no to sin and yes to righteousness.

It says that sin cannot and will not win. Satan does not and cannot triumph. It means that we are forever irreversibly changed. If you believe in Christ, you are a new creation, the old has gone forever and now all things are made new.

If you are not a Christian, then you must see that you are forever stuck in the mire. You are inescapably bogged down in the sinking sands of your own vice. Satan's schemes are working on you. Only Christ can set you free. Only Christ destroys the devil's works. Christmas holds out to us the good news that Jesus Christ was manifested to destroy the devil's works and take our sins away. Unless we rest ourselves wholly on Him, that happy demolition job will never take place among Satan's high towers in our own lives.

May God grant that this year, amidst all the festivities and tinsel of the season, we run to Christ alone to be our deliverer.

Amen.