



## Clearing The Air

Rachael Suddarth – April 11, 2010

This week we have been contemplating the final day of Jesus' life. Jesus was betrayed by his closest friends, he was charged with crimes he did not commit, he was mocked, beaten, tortured, and murdered. He went willing to slaughter.

The sacrifice of Jesus was so great, the pain so terrible, the devastation so complete that sin has to be as terrible as he said it was.

If sin were breaking a list of rules in a classroom, we could straighten up and fly right. We could just stop misbehaving. If sin were breaking a list of rules then Jesus' death and suffering was a waste of time. His existence was a useless, pointless, exercise in sacrifice.

But sin is not like breaking the rules. Jesus says it is addictive, toxic, infesting. Jesus said sin was so aggressive we should chop our foot off; it is so heinous we should pluck our eye out; it is so destructive we should drown ourselves. It is so terrible and heart wrenching that he was willing to die to set us free.

Jesus used a very graphic and drastic approach to sin when he taught. Consider this:

*If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.*

These last two weeks we have talked about the vivid teachings of Jesus. Jesus made claims that violate my innate sense of what is important, like my hands. Now I think avoiding sin is important. But

I'm not sure it's *that* important! I'm not sure it is so important that I should chop my hand off. Which leaves with a dilemma.

Either I am grossly underestimating how utterly terrible it would be to be drowned or I am woefully underestimating just how bad sin really is. It has to be one or the other. I don't know about you, but to me being tied with binding ropes to a huge rock and getting tossed into the sea just sounds bad. Really bad, terribly bad – horrendously, nightmarishly, horrifically bad! It would be so bad to be drowned that it makes me wonder if I don't understand exactly how serious sin really is.

Jesus' assumptions about sin collide with my own. When Kris talked about sin being a list of rules and Katy talked about sin being a carnival, I tracked with that. When they taught us that Jesus thought sin was the most destructive force in the world, so destructive it had to be eliminated, brutally if need be, I struggled.

Okay, I've heard that sin smells bad, like rotten milk, like a corpse. But why do I even need to smell sin, why should I care what that aroma is like? Well, I realize that if all you know is curdled milk, then you don't know its bad anymore, it just is. That becomes the smell of all milk like Josh shared earlier.

I am sure everyone has had an instance where they have "gotten used to" a smell. Whether it is driving through pig country in Oklahoma, a cattle yard in Texas, or getting used to the bad smelling trash can. Our noses become accustomed to the unpleasant smells. Your brain ignores the familiar, because that information is no longer needed. Okay, it smells bad, check.

We have gotten so used to the stench of sin, that we have stopped processing it. If we stop smelling sin then we forget we need Jesus. We stop crying out. We no longer see the problem and have accepted sin and all of its consequences – sin is a part of life, not something to struggle against.

So why do we need to truly smell sin? Why do we need to be convicted? Why do we need to deeply feel sin, crying out in our pain and anguish? Why do we need to mourn?

Smelling sin, knowing the reality of it, should not depress us – it should make us cry out for help. Jesus came to heal and not just the physical, but the emotional and the spiritual. Jesus healed those who asked, he did not heal those who remained silent.

We do not demean grace when we feel guilty for our sins, when we feel true remorse. This crying out, this "bad" feeling is central to the story of Jesus. Time and time again people flock to Jesus and bow before him, humbly, desperately asking for help. It's these other familiar false smells – the popcorn at a carnival, the chalk in a classroom – that cheapen grace and rip away the chance to bravely mourn and cleanly repent of our sins.

Jesus said it was the poor in spirit who are lucky, because they are the ones who smell sin. They see what is in their hearts and the desperately go to Jesus for help. It is a hard thing to pluck out your own eye, it is a hard thing to have the courage to say, "I am a sinner, and I need help." If we keep believing

what the world says about sin, then we will never know what it is to be poor in spirit. Sure we might feel naughty or guilty, and we'll utter a prayer or two to clear our conscience, but we won't know true poverty of the spirit.

Consider what Jesus said:

*Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other. Luke 18:10-14*

We do this all the time. "I may sin, but I'm not as bad as that guy." We are people who compare. We compare ourselves in the way we look, what car we drive, what kind of education we have, and most certainly what our sins are.

I know I find myself comparing my sins to others. And at a point I find myself angry at them for all the wrong reasons. For example, the serial killer Jeffery Dahmer. What horrifies me about Jeffery Dahmer? Well it isn't the seventeen murders he was convicted of, the eleven corpses found in his apartment, it isn't that he ate his victims or that he kept the skulls in the freezer as trophies.

It is that he repented. It is that he asked for forgiveness from Jesus and he was baptized. It is that he became a Christian and I will spend eternity right next to him in heaven. Sins washed, soul cleansed, past forgiven.

Grace for a murderer. Grace for a rapist. Grace for a cannibal.

Yes. Grace for Jeffery Dahmer. He knew that what he did was so wrong that he could not look up to heaven and list his good deeds. All he could do was bow his head in desperation and beg for mercy.

It is the mournful who truly feels the reality of his sins. Who in the very words of Jesus *went down to his house justified*. In Jesus day it was the desperate who longed for just a touch from Jesus and were willing to risk social outrage to get that touch.

Those who felt they were just fine, no need to beg for forgiveness, they just ignored him. Until people started following Jesus, and then the religious leaders got scared and plotted his murder.

The people who thought they were righteous did not think they needed Jesus, so he could do nothing for them. They could not smell their own stench. They had gotten used to the smell. Sure they masked it for other people, fasting, tithing, studying the bible – a fragrant perfume to douse their bodies in, in the hopes that no one would notice the rotten stench underneath.

So if we fail to smell our sin, if we are desensitized to its stench, we need something drastic to overcome the complacency. So Jesus recommends chopping off our hand or plucking out our eye. For us to smell our sin again, to know that there is a serious problem, we have to be moved. We need to fall down and beg for clarity, to plead for change, to desperately seek Jesus and his grace.

Jesus was not graphic about the reality of sin because he was interested in depressing us. Jesus longed for us to know the truth – and longed for us to cry out to him in our need.

*Come to me if you are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Matthew 11:28*

If we believe we're just being naughty in the classroom of life, how can we hear the beautiful invitation from Jesus? If we believe in lukewarm sin, won't our repentance be lukewarm as well?

No wonder Jesus said it was the poor in spirit, the beggars in spiritual matters, who were blessed and lucky. No wonder he welcomed those who mourned. Those are the people who received transformation, who were moved to smell the rotten infection of sin and became something more.

*For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. 2 Corinthians 2:15-16*

So if we cannot smell our sin then we cannot fully accept the grace and mercy Jesus has poured out. If we cannot smell our sin and embrace grace then we cannot truly worship. If we underestimate the impact of sin, then we underestimate exactly what Jesus accomplished for us.

A hero who saves us from the stench and death of slavery – now that's a man I want to find, a man at whose feet I could collapse breathlessly. But someone who saves me from the results of being naughty? Hmmm. Well, if he's around then I guess I'll thank him.

As we learn Jesus' teachings about the smell of sin, we are finally free to worship. We realize that the grace of Jesus isn't some legal maneuver to help us "settle out of court" with God, so that our small acts of sin aren't held against us.

Our sins are immense and we are guilty. We are tried, convicted, and sentenced to death. But Jesus accepted that punishment for us, instead of us. That is something to worship about.

Lets look at one story of worship in Luke.

*A woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that Jesus was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Luke 7:37-38*

What a clear picture of worship. This woman could not move, could not speak because the anguished weeping took her whole body. These tears left her vulnerable, exposed, repentant, not caring who saw her or what they thought. So, were they tears of sorrow or joy?

Yes.

She knew that only Jesus understood her, forgave her, loved her.

And what did the Pharisees Jesus was eating with do. They couldn't believe a sinful woman interrupted their party. The host began to complain about her actions, of course. So Jesus, who had silently accepted her love and worship, explained what had just happened by using a parable.

*A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denari, the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?*

The host, Simon, answered,

*The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more.*

Exactly.

Exactly.

Jesus knew that those who were forgiven much loved much. And looking into the eyes of Simon, Jesus calmly spoke this truth:

*The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.*

He who is forgiven little loves little. So the person who is forgiven simply for being naughty or breaking the rules – is that person able to only love a little too?

Yes. Knowing the smell of sin frees us from a lukewarm love of Jesus – knowing the smell of sin allows us to truly feel forgiveness and redemption.

When Jesus embraced the needy, their sin apparent and large, they could only respond in beauty, in worship of him. And those self-righteous types just watching, thinking they were sinless, could only stand around and complain that Jesus was hanging out with the wrong crowd.

What has church become, do we look like Jesus embracing the wrong crowd and loving them, or do we stand around condemning those who are a light, who are the aroma of God.

I read a story in *What's So Amazing About Grace* that really made me realize the churches aroma.

Philip Yancey had a friend who shared this story.

*A prostitute came to me in wretched straits, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me she had been renting out her daughter – two years old! – to men interested in kinky sex. She made more renting out her daughter for an hour than she could earn on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit. I could barely stand hearing her sordid story. I had no idea what to say to this woman. At last I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naïve shock that crossed her face. ‘Church!’ she cried. ‘Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.’*

Yancey then said:

*What struck me about my friend’s story is that women much like this prostitute fled toward Jesus, not away from him. The worse a person felt about herself, the more likely she saw Jesus as a refuge. Has the church lost that gift? Evidently the down and out, who flocked to Jesus when he lived on earth, no longer feel welcome by his followers. What has happened?*

What has happened?

We have forgotten that we stink just like everyone else. Our belief that we have done nothing really bad insulates us from what sin truly is, what Jesus said it truly was. We love little because we have been forgiven little. We don’t reach out to the prostitutes because we can’t truly see what Jesus has done for us.

When we begin to see the blackness in our own spirits, we not only start truly worshipping, but

*...we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved...the smell of life.*

Admitting how bad our sin is does not muddy the grace of Jesus. Recognizing the true smell of sin brings it into full light for the first time. It compels us toward true worship and love.

Those who are forgiven much do love much.

We sing songs like “Amazing Grace”, but if Grace is so amazing why don’t Christians show more of it.

How is it that Christians called to dispense the aroma of disgrace instead emit the noxious fumes of ungrace?

How does a grace-filled Christian look? The Christian life is not about ethics or rules, the Christian life involves a new way of seeing things.

We must see ourselves as sinners who cannot please God by hard work. We can only please God by humbly kneeling at his feet and crying out for forgiveness, only then can we turn to God for Grace. And when we cry out we can finally see that a holy God already loves us despite our defects.

In Matthew 7 Jesus says:

*Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'*

"I never knew you."

Jesus did not say, "You never knew me," or "You never knew my Father." He said "I never knew you."

How do we make ourselves known to God. Good works are not enough – 'did we not prophecy in your name' – any genuine relationship requires full disclosure.

Thomas Merton wrote:

*We cannot find Him unless we know we need him.*

Jesus is closer to sinners than to supposed saints. One Christian lecturer put it this way:

*God in heaven holds each person by a string. When you sin, you cut the string. The God ties it up again, making a knot – and thereby bringing you a little closer to him. Again and again your sins cut the string – and with each further knot God keeps drawing you closer and closer.*

The false smell of sin, the popcorn at the carnival where all cool kids seem to be having fun, the chalk in the classroom where we have a giant list of dos and don'ts: makes us believe we can make it on our own, that we can tie the string ourselves; the fresh air of grace corrects that error. When we truly begin to smell grace, we know that there is nothing else as good or as beautiful. And nothing we can do to create it.

Think back to the prostitute's comment.

*Church! Why would I ever go there?*

Church should be a haven for people who feel terrible about themselves. God needs humble people to accomplish his work. Whatever makes us feel superior to other people, whatever tempts us to convey a sense of superiority, that is NOT grace.

Readers of the gospel marvel at Jesus' ability to move with ease among the sinners and outcasts. Having spent time around "sinners" and also around supposed "saints", I have a hunch why Jesus spent so much time with the "sinners" and it isn't because they were having so much more fun. I think he preferred their company. Because the sinners were honest about themselves and had no pretense, Jesus could actually build a relationship with them. In contrast the "saints" judged him, and tried to find ways to trap him. In the end it was the saints who arrested and killed Jesus, not the sinners.

Recall the story of Jesus at Simon the Pharisees house, in which a woman not so different from the prostitute in Chicago poured perfume on Jesus and provocatively wiped his feet with her hair. Simon was repulsed, that woman did not even deserve to enter his house!

*Then Jesus turned to the woman and said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.'*

Why is it, that the church sometimes conveys the spirit of Simon the Pharisee rather than that of the forgiven woman? Churches should be the fresh air of grace to those who are dieing.

The idea of church existing to dispense grace is profound, but churches often don't meet little needs let alone safety and support.

Tim's car broke down in Kansas City and he needed to use the phone. Now this was in the days before everyone had a cell phone. He walked to several churches who refused to let him use their phone, they don't want the wrong people coming in, it was against policy. So he went to Erotic City Boutique down the street. They gladly let him use their phone and phone book and even let him take the phone outside since he was clearly uncomfortable. Tim received more love from a porn shop than from the church.

Alcoholics Anonymous rarely meets in churches. Why? Wouldn't we all assume that they would readily let people use their facility to break the bonds of addiction and self-destruction?

Churches care more about their buildings than the souls of the devastated. Churches don't let them in because they are inconvenient and make a mess. AA members fight off the demons of addiction to drugs and alcohol by relying on the lesser demons of coffee and cigarettes. Few churches want to put up with the coffee stains on the carpet and the cigarette butts outside.

It is unfortunate that churches do not embrace AA as a ministry; in many ways it resembles what the first church looked like. The news anchors and wealthy, mingling with the unemployed dropouts and kids who wear band-aids to hide needle marks. The "sharing time" is like a small group, marked by compassionate listening, warm responses, and hugs. Each person introduces themselves, "Hi, I'm Samantha, and I am an alcoholic and drug addict." Then of course everyone responds with, "Hi Samantha." Each person in attendance shares their struggle with drugs and alcohol and gives an update on their battle with addiction.

AA runs on two principles: radical honesty and radical dependence. These are the very same principles expressed in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus' capsule summary of living "one day at a time", and in many AA meetings they recite the Lord's Prayer together at each meeting.

AA would never allow a person to say, “Hi I’m Samantha, I used to be an alcoholic but now I’m cured.”

Even if Samantha had not had a drink for thirty years, she must still identify herself as an alcoholic. She also could never say, “I may be an alcoholic, but I’m not as bad as Tom over there. He’s a cocaine addict.” In AA the ground is level.

In a book by Brennan Manning a recovering alcoholic puts it this way

*It is the only place I know where status mean nothing. Nobody fools anybody else. Everyone is here because he or she made a slobbering mess of his or her life and is trying to put the pieces back together again...I have attended thousands of church meetings, lodge meetings, brotherhood meetings – yet I have never found the kind of love I find at AA. For one small hour the high and mighty descend and the lowly rise. The leveling that results is what people mean when they use the word brotherhood.*

The AA program demands radical dependence on a higher power and on fellow strugglers. AA members openly ask God for forgiveness and strength and ask their friends for support. They come to AA because the sweet air of grace surrounds them.

But there is a disconnect, though many members of AA believe in God and have accepted his grace, they don’t see church as a place they can go. Church people seem to have it all together, while they are just barely hanging on. They feel more at ease slumped over in a metal chair, wearing blue jeans, and cussing. That’s where they belong, not in a stain-glass sanctuary.

If only they realized, if only the church realized that some of the most important spiritual lessons came from the sinners drinking coffee and smoking. People like the woman in Luke 7, came with radical honesty and left with radical dependence.

The good people and the bad people are the same. We all are in desperate need of forgiveness. When I am tempted to recoil from sinners, I force myself to consider what it must have been like to be Jesus on earth. Perfect and sinless. Jesus had every right to be repulsed by the behavior of those around him. Yet he treated notorious sinners with mercy and not judgment.

One who has been touched by grace will no longer look on those who stray as “those evil people” or “those poor people who need our help”.

Grace teaches us that God loves us because of who he is, not because of who we are.

We are called to smell the residue of hidden worth; we are called to find the sweet air of grace. If we are overwhelmed with the stench of sin we cannot receive grace or give grace.

So we have all heard, “Hate the sin, but love the sinner,” which is more easily preached than practiced. If Christians could simply recover that practice, modeled by Jesus, we could go a long way in fulfilling our role as grace givers.

For a long time C.S. Lewis said that he could never understand the hairsplitting distinction between hating a person's sin and hating the sinner. How could you hate what a man did and not hate the man?

*But years later it occurred to me that there was one man to whom I had been doing this all my life – namely myself. However much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit, or greed, I went on loving myself. There had never been the slightest difficulty about it. In fact the very reason why I hated the things was that I loved the man. Just because I loved myself, I was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did those things.*

Christians should not compromise on hating sin, says Lewis. Rather we should hate the sin in others in the same way we hate the sin in ourselves: being sorry the person has done such things, hoping that somehow, somewhere, the person will be cured.

So what can we do to shake the smell of sin, how can we love the sinner, while hating the sin. How can we battle our own sin, so we can share the fresh air of grace?

Jesus calls for drastic action in dealing with our own sin. It is a first step, a starting point – cut off your hand.

Jesus asked the rich young ruler to give away all of his possessions, because they were a temptation.

What is our temptation?

In the book "Smell of Sin" by Don Everts he lists some of the ways that he has seen people battle their temptations.

A vain woman cut off her long, beautiful hair.

A proud woman covered every mirror in her house for 3 months.

A slothful man put a hammer through his tv.

A lustful man gave his Ethernet card to a friend for safekeeping.

Were these changes easy to make – no, absolutely not. It is difficult. Jesus promised it would be. It's tough to make drastic changes to remove temptation.

But was it worth it? Jesus does not lie. It is better to cutoff your hand, it is better to gouge out your eye, it is better to drown yourself – then to keep sinning.

Two ways that you can combat temptation and combat superiority are confession and accountability.

Confession is a discipline. It is a discipline because we are sinners and Jesus knew we would have sins to confess on a regular basis. Confession needs to be regular, disciplined, and part of our lives. If we don't confess on a regular basis, it's not because we're all put together, but rather because we are lying to ourselves.

1 John 1:8-10

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.*

Confession is a forgotten discipline because we hate to confess our sins. It's hard, it's awkward, and so we'd rather not. And no one really expects confession of us anyway. It means they might have to confess too. Why ruin a perfectly good coffee date, with talk of sin.

It is so much easier to sip and nod and get on with our day. Why interrupt the flow of an easy relationship?

Because Jesus says that the way to life is indeed hard. In Matthew:

*The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life.*

And we want life. So we must confess our sins. And confession will shine light into dark places. It exposes hidden lies as the twisted things they are. It leaves room for the Holy Spirit to move in us as our hearts become less guarded, as we begin to "know Jesus". If we fail to confess, if we fail to challenge temptation Jesus will say

*'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'*

"I never knew you." What a spine chilling thing to think about, "Away from me, you evildoers."

Confession puts you on the path of life, where we can walk intimately with Jesus.

So, how can we confess?

Use few words.

Confess simply and honestly.

Your friend does not need to know all the excuses, they need to hear the truth, and you need to share what the sin is –not why.

So you are sitting there and just confessed a sin, now what. Confession is not a proactive way of stopping sin. You need Confessions companion, accountability.

We need to figure out how to have friends that keep us honest and encourage us. It is a simple thing, but it is a painful thing.

It is admitting that you are so weak, that you cannot do it alone.

Accountability takes finding a few friends who you have confessed your sin to, then asking them to directly and regularly – ask you about those sins. And then get ready, because they just might do it. – That is the painful part.

Here are a few important tips to make sure the painful conversations happen.

1. Make sure they know you want them to initiate. This will keep you honest.
2. Make sure they know you want them to ask you the hard questions, and to ask those questions more than once.
3. Make sure they will ask you at the end how you have lied to them during the confession, did you hide part of the truth, did you skirt over the most serious parts.

An accountability partner must be faithful, honest and persistent.

Make sure you thank them, and consider being that kind of friend to someone else. Be the kind of friend to others that you want them to be for you.

True accountability is beautiful and powerful. Never easy and safe.

Drastic actions – confession and accountability – sounds like a lot of effort. Isn't there an easier way?

Yes, Jesus said there was an easier way.

*There is a way that is easy that leads to death.*

Jesus was not kidding when he told the adulterous woman

*Go and sin no more.*

He really meant for her to go and live differently. He wanted her to see that conversion – big-time change—was possible for her. That she was meant for more than the half-life she had been living. A better life, a full life, was what the God of love wanted for her.

This call to hard work and sweat implies great hope. We strive against these sins knowing that it's Jesus who is both calling us to strive and enabling us to strive. It's Jesus who has freed us. And so we are not striving against the impossible, as the enemy would have us believe. It is possible to

change. This year doesn't have to be like the last three years. **Change is possible.** In fact, change is mandatory.

There is just no way that we can travel this hard way all on our own. But that is ok. In fact, that's wonderful. God isn't surprised that we can't make it on our own. He knows we can't. That is why he has given grace, freely.

Because of the smell of sin, because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we are free to cry out. We are free to love and worship Jess. We are free to know.

This morning if you are struggling with sin, if you are desperate to cry out, to confess, to move toward Jesus, come and talk to Tim, Ryan or I during worship or after the service. We are here to extend grace and love and compassion. We want to love you and show you God's love. This morning consider who you can turn to, to confess to, to be challenged by, to live life with. Don't let this morning pass you by without accepting the challenge to change, to be free of sin, to be enveloped by the fresh air of grace.