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Christian's Aren't Perfect ...: Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary

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This is what the bumper sticker said: “Christians aren’t perfect—just forgiven.” When I first read it, I was intrigued. Is this really what we are, “just forgiven”?

The theological one-liner made two assertions, and both were true. Yes, no human being (beside Jesus) is perfect. It is also true that God provides free forgiveness without exception to all who accept Jesus as their Savior—period. Yet there seemed to be something wrong with the message of that sticker, especially if you just read it on the bumper of a car that rudely cut you off in traffic. Is “being forgiven” really the only thing that identifies a person as a Christian or the only thing that matters in Christian life? The Bible seems to point to more. Remember John 10:10, which tells us that Jesus came to this earth and died not only to provide forgiveness but also to give us life, and to give it abundantly. If this is true, the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian should go beyond the fact that one of them is forgiven. There should be a notable difference in the “lives” they experience, don’t you think?

The answer we give to these questions has a lot to do with how we understand the ministry of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary.

**More Than Just Sin Management**

Some think that Jesus is just the head of a very efficient system of sin management for the universe, located in the heavenly sanctuary. Jesus is much more than that! The proper disposal of waste is imperative to human survival. Governments spend great amounts of money to collect, transport, process, and recycle or dispose waste because they understand this is crucial to the preservation of the environment and the health of their citizens. God also understood from the very beginning that sin destroys life. Thus, before the creation of the universe, He made a plan to dispose of sin forever, should it arise (1 Peter 3:18). This is what the bumper sticker said: “Christians aren’t perfect—just forgiven.” When I first read it, I was intrigued. Is this really what we are, “just forgiven”?

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1:20). This is what is called the plan of salvation, and the three members of the Godhead were fully involved in it.

God, however, is not only interested in collecting and disposing of our moral garbage. He is not content with being the garbage truck that comes every other day to take care of our sins. God wants to eradicate sin itself. That is why Jesus’ ministry in the heavenly sanctuary provides not only forgiveness but also the possibility of a new life—a life empowered by God.

New Covenant Blessings

The purpose of Jesus’ ministry in the heavenly sanctuary is to ensure that we receive the benefits of His sacrifice on our behalf. That purpose is fulfilled only when, after being cleared of the penalty of death, we are also delivered from enslavement to the devil. Jesus’ enthronement at the right hand of God guarantees these freedoms.

All over the world, governments protect certain rights of an individual. The second paragraph of the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, highlights four freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of belief, freedom from want, and freedom from fear—which is “proclaimed as the highest aspiration.” Jesus’ sacrifice was to protect the right of human beings to enter into a new covenant with God. Hebrews says that as a high priest of the heavenly sanctuary Jesus became “the guarantor” (Heb. 7: 22, NIV)* or “mediator of a better covenant” (Heb. 8:6, 7).

The new covenant guarantees or promises four things to believers: (1) God will put His laws in our minds; (2) He will be our God; (3) everyone will know God; and (4) God will forgive our sins (Heb. 8:8-12). The way Ezekiel refers to the promises of this covenant is enlightening (see Eze. 36:26, 27). Together with putting His law in our hearts (Jer. 31:33), God also promises to put His Spirit in our lives. Both promises refer to different aspects of the same reality. By giving us His Spirit, God gives us the power to obey His laws (Rom. 8:1-4). These guarantees effectively liberate us from enslavement to the devil and prevent future bondage to him.

With Confidence

God offers the guarantees of the new covenant to human beings not because it is their inalienable right. They forfeited these rights when they rejected His rule. These benefits are the inalienable right of Jesus. Because of His victory Jesus has been appointed “heir of all things” (Heb. 1:2) and ruler of a new people of God. Just as any country benefits from a good government, believers benefit from Jesus’ rule. Believers reap the benefits of Jesus’ victories over His enemies. Thus, when Jesus asks blessings for us, He is not asking the Father a favor on our behalf. He is claiming the benefits of His victory to share with us. That is why Hebrews says that we need to approach God’s throne “boldly” (Heb. 4:16) and “in full assurance of faith” (Heb. 10:22). We may have doubts about our own worthiness, but never of Jesus’ worth.

Not all human beings can approach God with confidence, though. This is very important. Only the followers of Jesus benefit from the guarantees that the rule of Jesus provides. This helps us understand an important aspect of Christian life. What determines our eligibility to the benefits of the new covenant is not our ability to defeat the devil (Jesus already did that) but our loyalty to Jesus. The crucial issue is not how strong I am, but how much do I love Jesus.

When I think of Jesus’ ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, I cannot help thinking about the contradiction of our situation. We have so rich promises but often live so poorly. We should claim those promises right now. I like how Ellen G. White says it: “With the persevering faith of Jacob, with the unyielding persistence of Elijah, we may present our petitions to the Father, claiming all that He has promised [that is, the new covenant promises]. The honor of His throne is staked for the fulfillment of His word” (Prophets and Kings, p. 158).


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