

The Cover-Up

In the name of him who was tempted in every way, and yet remained without sin, dear friends in Christ: I think it's fair to say that just about everyone enjoys hearing about some huge scandal in the world of politics. It's music to our ears when accusations emerge concerning a powerful politico who's been taking bribes, philandering, rigging elections, or otherwise abusing the public trust. For most of us, of course, this is true only when it happens to someone in the other party, the one with which we are not affiliated. We like seeing one of the other guys taken down because it makes it more likely that we can get one of our guys in. The only folks who don't care one way or the other who the scandal involves are those who work for the press. For them it's a juicy story either way. It's going to attract an audience. And if they have political leanings one way or the other (and who doesn't?) they can use their podium to spin the story to their favor; playing the scandal down if it's somebody they like, or blowing it all out of proportion if it's somebody they don't like.

Ah, but what really amplifies a scandal when it's revealed is if there's evidence of a cover-up. It shows that the perpetrators not only were aware they were committing the crime in question, but then they went out of their way to use dishonest means to try to hide it. It's crime upon crime; a double betrayal of the public trust. And it's amazing to what lengths people will go to do it. The original misdeed might be a relatively minor matter, which, if they'd simply admitted, might have soon been forgotten. But no, to maintain the façade of innocence, all kinds of other crimes are involved to cover it up – and those crimes need to be covered too. You need an ever-expanding carpet to sweep all the dust under. And that makes containment a problem. Then sooner or later somebody talks or leaks it to the press and the whole sordid affair comes out in the open. But that never stops the next politician from thinking their attempt at cover-up will be successful. "I'll be the one who doesn't get caught." Yeah, good luck with that.

Of course, it's not just politicians who try to hide their misdeeds. We all do it. You might even say it's bred into us. Just as sure as we are all sinners, so also we go through all kinds of maneuvers to appear to be less sinful than we are. This is evident already in the account of the first sin, the one committed by our original ancestors when they were in the Garden. We heard that narrative again as today's Old Testament lesson. And so what I'd like to do is review the story in detail to reveal both the futility of attempting any kind of cover-up – especially when the Lord is involved (it's hard to hide anything from him) – and the proper method of dealing with the guilt and shame of our sin.

Here we go: as Genesis chapter three begins we have our first parents in the state of innocence. They still retain the image of God in which they were created, which means (among other things) that they love each other perfectly. Each one is entirely devoted to the happiness and wellbeing of the other. From the moment they awake to the time they lie down to sleep, all they can think about is how to serve the good of their partner. I expect they dream about it too. Now, it is the nature of the divine love they possess to be self-sacrificing. When Adam thinks about serving Eve and seeing to her wellbeing, he never takes into account what the cost will be to himself. He's entirely focused on her. And she's the same way toward him. They quite literally give themselves to and for the good of the other. Their love is inherently self-sacrificial.

And that is why God has also placed in the Garden the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It is not, as some have supposed and taught, some kind of test of obedience; as if the

Lord were sitting on high with his hand ready to strike the moment somebody steps out of line. “Go ahead. Make my day.” No, not at all. You see, because Adam and Eve love, they must also love God. But here’s the problem: God has no needs. When Adam and Eve serve each other, what they’re doing is tending to each other’s needs. But there’s nothing they can do to serve the Lord sacrificially because he doesn’t need anything. Thus they don’t have a way to express their love for him. That’s what the tree is for. By giving them the tree and asking them to not eat its fruit, he’s given them a means to express their love. Their not eating from this particular tree is their sacrifice, the sacrifice by which they show their love for God. They need this tree. It’s their place of worship. It’s the one place on the planet they can say to the Lord, “We know you love us. We have only to look at all the wonderful things you’ve made and done for us. By not eating this fruit, by giving this up, we’re saying we love you too.” So don’t think of the tree as something bad. It’s actually very good.

Satan, however, is the master of twisting what God has given for our good and getting us to use it for evil purposes. That’s what the temptation is all about. He plants in Eve’s mind the thought that the Lord is holding back something, a wisdom that will make her more like God. The suggestion is that the Lord doesn’t love you as much as he pretends. You could be more. You could be better. You could do something for yourself. And no, Adam doesn’t get off the hook. He’s standing there listening too. While he should be saying, “No dear, that’s not what the Lord said. Let’s listen to God’s Word”, he’s silently letting his own thinking to be led astray. He too wants something for himself – at God’s expense. And that is the nature of sin: to think about serving self first. It’s the opposite of divine love.

And having allowed themselves to be seduced in their thinking, our first parents ate the forbidden fruit. And by doing so, they were saying, “We don’t love you, Lord; nor do we trust your Word.” And note that the first thing that happens is they become aware of their nakedness. You see, before they had nothing to hide. They were completely without a sense of self-consciousness or shame. Why? Because they were always looking at the other. That was the object of their love. And they liked what they saw. The only way you can know you’re naked is to look at yourself. They never thought about themselves before. But now that’s what has become their focus. That’s the object of their love: me, myself, and I. And now they don’t like what they see. Now they have the knowledge of evil – and they know they are it.

And thus they attempted the first cover-up. We’ve got to hide it. We’ve got to pretend everything is okay. We have to act as if we are not ashamed – even though we are. So they reach for the fig leaves and begin sewing them together. And yes, outwardly they were trying to cover their naked bodies; but even more they were trying to hide the ugly nakedness and shame of the inner person, the one that no longer loved the other as much as the self. Now when they looked at each other they were thinking not, how can I serve you? But how can I get you to serve me? That’s what they were ashamed of. And rightly so.

But fig leaves? Really? How long is that going to last? Oh, it might do the job for a few hours, but then the leaves are going to wilt. Eventually they’ll dry up and become brittle. This fig leaf fashion-wear is going to have to be replaced constantly. They’ll have to keep working at it – and even then it’s never really going to do the job they intend. Maybe eventually they’ll find a more durable leaf, but still, it can’t last. And we can only hope that if they had had time to experiment, they wouldn’t have tried covering up with poison oak. But anyway, it seems they did manage to make themselves presentable to each other however *briefly*. By covering what they considered to be the shameful parts of their bodies, they convinced themselves that they’d effectively hidden their guilty, loveless hearts from each other.

But then they hear the sound of the Lord walking in the Garden. And immediately they realize how silly and ridiculous they look. What's the Lord going to say? "No, no. I told you to take care of the Garden. You are to dress its trees, not dress yourselves with them. What? Are you trying to be a plant?" They realize in an instant this isn't going to work. But if leaves can't cover our shame, maybe the trees can. Let's run and hide our whole bodies. You see, their fleeing is still an attempted cover-up. And it's just as effective. Where can one go to hide from the Lord?

But they're not done trying to cover-up. When the Lord asks Adam, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" He could tell the truth. He could confess his guilt. But no, he blames his wife. "It's her fault. I'm still the good guy. Blame her, your honor. Oh, and it's your fault too, Lord, because you gave her to me. Everyone is guilty but me." Likewise the woman: "No, Lord, I'm not guilty. The devil made me do it." They are just more fig leaves. More attempted cover-up. And still just as effective by which I mean not effective at all.

Oh that we would learn the lesson, because I'm not talking about Adam and Eve. I'm talking about you and me. Where do you run and try to hide from the Lord? What are your fig leaves? What do you use to try to hide your sins from him? How do you hide your sins from others? What excuses do you make for yourself? Whom do you blame for your bad behavior? "I would never behave like that on my own, oh no. It's her fault for making me so angry." "Yeah, well, I wouldn't have to nag him all the time if he weren't so lazy." "I'm innocent. Everyone else is guilty." And how often do you blame the Lord? How many times have you dismissed some habitual sin by saying, "It's his fault, after all, he made me this way"? Or "If he didn't want me to do this, he shouldn't have allowed me to be tempted like I was." We've got all kinds of fig leaves, don't we?

And there are three problems with them. The first is that it takes a lot of work to maintain the façade. You've got to remember which lies you told and to whom, and you have to keep changing the story when confronted by those nasty things called facts as they come to light. Dressing in fig leaves means staying busy. They need constant replacement. The second problem is that you're not fooling anyone; least of all the Lord. Your fig leaves only make you appear more pathetic and ridiculous. But the third and biggest problem is that as long as you keep applying fig leaves to hide the guilt and shame of your sin, you'll never arrive at the proper way – the Lord's way – of dealing with them.

He has the solution. We see that also in today's text. It begins with the Lord seeking sinners and calling them back to himself by his Word. And when he finds them he then proceeds to strip away their attempts to cover-up and he diagnoses the true problem: it is your fault. You did what I told you not to do. You love yourself more than anyone or anything else. And that's what makes you evil. Your heart is corrupt. Call it what it is. Confess it. And yes, there are consequences for sin, just like I warned you: pain, suffering, futile work, thorns and thistles, and ultimately death. Sin always brings about unpleasant consequences. There's no such thing as a victimless crime. If by your sin you're not hurting someone else, then at very least you're hurting yourself. Fig leaves only prolong the agony. Your attempts to justify or excuse yourself will never work.

Nor can you work your way back to goodness and perfection. The heart having become corrupt so that all love is turned inward on itself is not repairable. Besides, what would you use? Trying to clean up your own heart is like trying to sterilize surgical instruments with old used bandages that are soaked through with rotten ooze. Yuck. That won't work either.

So, what's the solution, then? Oddly enough, it's the same as before the fall: it's to stop looking at yourself. In there you will only find things to be ashamed of. And it's good that you look there to discover what's wrong and how deep the infection goes. But to find the solution you must look outside yourself – not to other people because they're just as sick with sin and shame as you are – but rather to the Savior God promised to send. He is the covering God has provided for you.

This is shown in the way the Lord provides coverings for Adam and Eve. He clothes them in animal skins, which we have to agree would be far more effective, durable, and comfortable than fig leaves. But more to the point, to get animal skins you have to kill animals. They don't do so well without their hides. And you'd be hard pressed to take a hide off a live animal. They have to be dead. So, our first parents were clothed properly only when something else died to cover their sin and shame.

This is the beginning and whole idea behind the Old Testament sacrificial system. The Lord allowed his people to make substitute sacrifices. His Law said the sinner must die for his or her sins; but the Lord looked with mercy on his people and declared that their sins could be transferred to another victim – a victim that would die in their place. To be sure, these animal sacrifices didn't really take away or cover sin, but what they did was to prefigure and point to the sacrifice that Jesus would make when he died for the sins of the world. It's his death on the cross that covers us and makes us presentable to the Lord. He is our proper, lasting, and complete cover-up. And only he will do.

And that's vital for us to remember as once again we begin the penitential season of Lent – a time set aside by the church to get serious about our sin and our need for a Savior as great as the one God sent in his Son. Therefore let us take off and cast away forever the fig leaves we use to try to hide the truth about ourselves. They only make us look silly. They don't work. And as long as we try to wear them, they stand in the way of our putting on and wearing the perfect righteousness that is imputed to us by faith in Jesus – God's great sacrifice that he gave in love for us. Let's resolve to make his death our only cover-up before God and before one another while we remain in this life that we may in the next life give him our thanks and praise forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!