

Text: Hebrews 9:13,14. Ash Wednesday.

**February 10, 2016.**

Grace and peace are yours through our Savior, who cleanses our consciences. Amen.

Have you ever wondered about Ash Wednesday? Kind of a strange day isn't it? I mean, people put ashes on their foreheads sometimes. Looks strange. Why have a day about ashes? We saw one reason in our first lesson today. Job repented in dust and ashes. Throughout the Bible, ashes are used as a symbol of repentance, being sorry for your sins. Ashes were used as a visible way to show this sadness over sin. But there's another thing ashes symbolized. Cleansing. Now that's really strange. Ashes make you dirty. Those people who put ashes on their foreheads go home and wash them off. And what do they use to wash off the ashes? Soap, right? Do you know one ingredient in old soap recipes? Ashes. That's right, ashes. Ashes symbolized cleansing. Ashes were used for outward, ceremonial cleansing. But ashes can't clean your conscience. Soap can't scrub sin from your soul. Only Christ can cleanse your conscience. Only his blood can scrub sin from your soul. That's what we really celebrate on Ash Wednesday, the cleansing of the conscience, the scrubbing of sin from the soul. Only Christ can cleanse your conscience. Only Christ can cleanse your conscience.

There are three stark contrasts on the two verses from God's Word in front of us. Is it better if I just tell you what they are and then we can explain them? Ok. The contrast between ceremonially clean and sin in the soul. The contrast between being outwardly clean and clean in the conscience. And the contrast between the blood of bulls and goats, which can't take away sin, and the blood of Christ which actually does cleanse the conscience.

First, ceremonially clean or unclean. It was a big deal in the Old Testament to be ceremonially unclean. You couldn't come into the temple area to worship God! You had to stay outside the camp, so you couldn't be around people. This had to stink! And you could become unclean even for acts of love you performed. If your grandmother died and you helped bury her, that was contact with a dead body. Unclean! Outside the camp. No temple for you!

The solution to ceremonial uncleanness? Ashes. The priest burned a heifer, collected the ashes, mixed them with water and sprinkled it on you. Then after the appropriate waiting time, you would be ceremonially clean, back with people, able to come into the temple. But did those ashes scrub the soul of sin? Does an ash cross on the forehead or hand really remove the guilt? You see, the ashes only produced some outward cleansing so you would be ceremonially clean. And think about this, ashes mixed with water wouldn't really make you clean, probably actually more dirty. But that was the ceremony to be ceremonially clean, outwardly clean: ashes.

There was something more graphic. Blood. Every morning, the blood of an animal, sacrificed for your sins. Every afternoon, more blood. For ceremonial uncleanness, the blood of a goat. For really serious stuff, the blood of a bull. These were precious animals, your car, your food, your wealth, your livelihood. Valuable sacrifices, costing you dearly. And you had to offer them completely, spill their blood, all in an effort to be ceremonially clean, outwardly sanctified. But here's the thing. As this same book of Hebrews says, "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin." And just a few verses before our reading it says the sacrifices of goats and bulls being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. The blood of bulls and goats, offered day after day, weren't cleansing the conscience. A million bulls and goats couldn't scrub sin from the soul.

Our situation is much the same as that, isn't it? Only worse! We don't have a problem with ceremonial uncleanness, we commit acts that lead to death. Certainly included in this are all our big, bad sins. The wages of sin is death. Hating, cheating, lying, slander. But it goes deeper than that. What about the acts that look outwardly good, but are done to earn God's favor? But God, you have to love me, I came to church on a Wednesday night! That's trying to scrub your soul with the steel wool of extra sin. That attitude adds to the pile not takes away. But God, I'm a good person. I'm better than those people at work. Isn't that what religion is all about? Those "righteous" acts? Filthy rags. Try cleaning your conscience with them.

And then there's the conscience, you know that guy. Heaping up the guilt. Remember how you used to live? You think this is making up for it? If pastor knew what you really did on Saturday night, he wouldn't greet you with a smile. And God knows what you really did. How dare you come into his house and think you are good enough to worship him! You should be cast outside where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth! A little ash cross going to quiet that voice? A little steel wool on the skin going to shut that guy up? Some blood of a goat or bull?

But how much more will the blood of Christ cleanse our conscience! How much more! How much more! How much more? Eternally more, inwardly more, perfectly more. The blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from every sin! Every sin! Even those of 30 years ago we would rather forget but our conscience won't let us. Christ has cleansed your conscience. His blood washes you clean. If you think you're too bad for God, you're wrong! Jesus' blood cleanses you. Christ has cleansed your conscience. If you think you're good, you're wrong. You're a sinner, with every sin washed clean in the blood of Christ. Every sin cleansed from your conscience. How much more will the blood of Christ cleanse the conscience! How much more!

How much more? This blood of Christ is the blood of an unblemished sacrifice. Now animals in the old testament sacrifices had to be outwardly without blemish. Christ was more than that. Christ was inwardly unblemished. No sins on his soul. Not one sin committed. Not one sinful stain. Christ was perfectly and actively obedient every day of his life. We'll be examining how Christ actively obeyed each one of God's commandments in your place in these upcoming Lenten services. So come back. Christ was unblemished, so his sacrifice was good enough to count for the sins of the whole world. Christ's blood was holy and precious, his suffering innocent, his death valuable enough to count for the sins of all the world. That means you! You! Just you! Your conscience is cleansed. Your soul is scrubbed. It not just an outward cleansing. It's a cleansing of the conscience. It's not just a superficial scrubbing. It's a scrubbing of the soul, from every sin. How much more! How much more indeed!

And now, look at what we get to do. Consciences cleansed, we get to serve the living God. The word serve is a word that's often used for worship. Remember the outwardly, ceremonially unclean couldn't enter the temple area. But we can! Our souls are scrubbed, our consciences are cleansed. We get to approach God with freedom and confidence. We get to worship him in this special place, not so that he will love us, but because he already does love us. Maybe you will shovel your neighbor's walk. Maybe you'll give up a few Thursday nights for extra worship. Maybe you'll start doing the dishes at home. These are things that cleansed consciences get to do. You don't need to put ashes on your forehead, but if it helps you remember your conscience is cleansed, you certainly can. You don't need the blood of goats and bulls. You have the blood of Christ! And how much more the blood of Christ cleanses the conscience! How much more Christ cleanses the conscience! Amen.