

DEEP LOVE

O love, how deep, how broad, how high,
 Beyond all thought and fantasy,
That God, the Son of God, should take
 Our mortal form for mortals' sake!

The Son of God became a human. What is the big deal about that? When God created humans, Genesis tells us, “God saw all He created, and it was good.” Humans may have some flaws, but don’t we consider most people to be at least okay?

In Galatians 5 St. Paul lists the fruit of the group of people who will not inherit eternal life with God --sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. Do we fall into that category? I could talk about the Adolph Hitlers and Vladimir Putins of this world, but what about the “good guys?”

Oscar Wilde, hardly a moral man himself, write in an 1891 article, “Charity creates a multitude of sins.” So, he probably wouldn’t have been surprised to hear that in London’s President’s Club, which raised money for causes including children’s hospitals through high-valued auctions, was forced to close after the *Financial Times* uncovered sexual assault at its annual dinner. Or that executives of Oxfam, a poverty eradication charity, visited prostitutes while delivering aid in earthquake-stricken Haiti, and were allowed to slink off to other charities, rather than being castigated for their actions. Or that ex-Save the Children executives Brendan Cox and Justin Forsyth stepped down from their roles at other charities, after allegations of sexual harassment and bullying toward junior female colleagues resurfaced.

Researchers explain this by what they call the theory of moral licensing: “When humans are good, we give ourselves license to be bad.” At the University of Chicago, they tested this by hiring people to transcribe images of short German texts, paying them 10 percent upfront, and giving them the remaining payment when they completed the transcriptions, or if they declared the documents too illegible to transcribe. When the workers were told that 5% of their wages would be donated to charity, there was a 25% increase of either not transcribing the text properly or declaring it illegible.

Daniel Effron, of the London Business School, specializes in organizational ethics. “There are two versions of moral licensing theory,” he says. “One is the ‘moral credentials mechanism,’ which is more to do with rationalization. Basically, it states, ‘I’ve done some good stuff. I’ve shown that I’m a good enough person. Now I can act ambiguously, because, as a good person, I know that my behavior is more likely to be good than bad.’ The other is the ‘moral credits’ mechanism, which works like a bank account. You do good stuff; you put a deposit in your bank account. You do bad stuff; you take a withdrawal. In that case, the bad deeds don’t have to be rationalizable.”

He also stresses that the “charity sector isn’t any more vulnerable” to instances of moral licensing than any other sector. Humans are very good, he says, at finding reasons to be bad and making “mountains of morality out of molehills of virtue.” Studies have shown that trivial acts, including buying environmentally friendly cosmetics, can give consumers a moral license to behave badly. But, he adds, “You could make the argument that in the charity sector, you don’t have to work as hard to find your moral license for being bad.” In other words, “When humans are good, we give ourselves license to be bad.”

The prophet Isiaah put it this way: “All our righteous deeds are like a filthy rag.”

The hymn reminds us that the Son of God simply became a human. It says He took, “Our mortal form for mortals’ sake!” Jesus became not only a human, but a human under all the effects of sin. St. Paul put it this way in Philippians 2:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And Jesus did this “for mortal’s sake!” Hebrews put it this way:

Therefore, the Son of God had to be made like His brothers in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make atoning sacrifice for the sins of the people.

The “atoning sacrifice” refers to how in the Old Testament sacrifices were made to “atone” or “cover” the sins of the people. That is what Jesus has done for us. We may picture on our minds a loving parent who covers a child to protect from fire or gunshot. But that child is loved by the parents. But Jesus didn’t “cover” a cute child. He covered filthy human beings rotted by sin. Think instead of covering an unkept, unshaven derelict who you can smell yards away. Picture a serial killer. Picture a terrorist. As Paul said, “God showed His love to us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” He died for those whose even “good” deeds are like a filthy rag.

Ash Wednesday is called that because in the Old Testament when people mourned they sat in ashes and wore sackcloth—burlap. One of those times of mourning was the Day of Atonement, when people mourned how their sin had polluted them. When they saw their sin, then they could see how loving it was that God forgave them as the sacrifice of blood was poured over the Ark of the Covenant. In that ark was the Ten Commandments. God could look at those commandments and see the sin of the people who broke them. But the blood covered it, so, in a sense, God could not see it. All this was symbolic of the way Jesus, but His death on the cross, covered our sins. Our Ash Wednesdays give us the chance to examine our lives and realize our sins—but even more the love of Jesus who was willing to cover it all.

St. Paul tells us in our lesson from Ephesians prays that we:

May have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Notice Paul talks about “comprehending with all saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth of God’s love,” saying that “to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” God love for us Jesus is a “deep love,” a love that we can never understand or control. But it the love that we receive.

Those of you who know me, know that I am both old and from Baltimore. That means when I think of the NFL, I think of the Baltimore Colts. Until 1984 the Colts were in Baltimore. One of their great players was Gino Marchetti, one of the best defensive ends of all time. In training camp a rookie was assigned to block Marchetti. When the ball was snapped, Marchetti knocked the player over. The offensive line coach screamed at the rookie to set up lower. Again, after the next snap Marchetti knocked him over. Again, the coach screamed for the player to set lower. This kept happening until Marchetti just vaulted over the player. The rookie looked up confused, and asked, “What do I do now?” The coach replied, “Just applaud.”

As we remember our sin, not just this evening, but each and every day, then we can “comprehend” Jesus’ love—not that we can understand it,, but we accept. We just applaud. For His love for us is so deep that it more than covers all our sin.