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Rick Myatt

DRINKING OUT OF THE TOILET WON’T WORK

John 19:17-42

Last year you might recall we got a lot of rain. It was much needed after several years of drought conditions. But it had one negative effect at the Myatt estate. In out backyard we had a crop of weeds that was truly impressive. The weeds were so high they were starting to resemble trees. There were so many it looked like we were growing a forest. It was downright overwhelming. One of my problems is if I do much work in the yard I stand a good chance of triggering an epic allergy attack that will result in a sinus infection that makes life unbeatable. Plus I was in the middle of treatments that sapped my strength and energy making dealing with weeds even more of a problem. A neighbor came to our rescue. His teenage son had to do a school project that would be satisfied by clearing the weeds out of our yard. What a help that was, and a relief.

Last week I was looking at our back yard with some dismay. The amazing Myatt weed forest was back. It wasn’t quite as bad as last year. It wasn’t a twin, but it could have been a cousin. It was like the great weed removal of last year never happened. The weeds were back with a vengeance. One of the frustrating things about weeds is the job of eradicating them never ends. It’s like a race you run that has no finish line. You never finish the job of removing weeds.

There are many things like that. This week I have to get the oil changed in our car. When do I get to quit doing that? I suppose it will be with us until we get an all electric car. Another thing I did this week is have a non-invasive skin cancer excised out of my forehead. Laurie claims I’m trying to get a face lift one piece at a time. I’m not, because that sounds to me like a way to end up with a face that looks like a jigsaw puzzle. Wouldn’t it be awesome if there was a one time cure for that? Take one pill and you’re done with that forever.

So much in life requires continuing constant efforts, things like haircuts, laundry, house cleaning, flossing your teeth and so much more. It never ends. It kind of feels like there are hardly any once for all time kinds of solutions to problems.

However, there is one thing that is a solution in that category. It turns out to be a solution to the biggest issue that every human faces. It is an issue that we tend to think is like the problem of weeds, something that requires continual efforts to fix. Yet the truth is that this problem was solved once for all time. We will see this as we look at John 19:17-42 and consider the implications of what happens there.

JESUS’ INTENTION WAS TO DIE

There is a statement in verse 30 that is the pivotal point in all of history. After being tortured for hours Jesus was about to die, and he knew it. At that point he said, “It is finished.” John, who was there witnessing these events, said, “With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” Jesus’ last words were, “It is finished.” In Aramaic, which was likely what Jesus spoke, it is one word, *mashelem*. In the Greek text it is also one word, *tetelestai*. Jesus was saying “My work here is done.” He had completed what he came to do. His death was not an accident, nor was it some tragedy done to him, a travesty over which he had no control. He died on purpose. His death completed his mission.

The Romans beat their victims before they crucified them. Jesus had probably been beaten twice before he was put on that cross. That might seem like over kill, but there was a reason for it. If you had the awful job of putting a man on a cross by first tying his arms to the cross bar, then driving spikes through his hands and feet into the wood, what sort of condition would you want him to be in? My guess is you would want him as weak and helpless as possible. The last thing you would want is a fully capable person, because he would fight you with all his might to try to stop you. So they beat the victims until they were in such bad shape that they couldn’t fight what the soldiers were doing to them.

When they executed someone by crucifixion the Romans put a sign on the cross announcing the crimes of the person. This was part of the deterrent, a way of saying, “If you do what this guy did, or you’ll end up where he is.” Pilate put up a sign in Aramaic, Greek and Latin on Jesus’ cross that read “Jesus of Nazareth, The King Of The Jews.” You occasionally might see the letters INRI associated with a cross. Those are the initials of the Latin words Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum. That’s the Latin for “Jesus of Nazareth, King Of The Jews.” The Jewish religious leaders objected to the sign, but Pilate basically said, “Tough beans. I wrote what I wrote. Deal with it.” I think he was ticked off that he was having to execute this guy, because he knew he was totally innocent. The sign was intended to thumb his nose at the Jewish leaders whom Pilate felt had outmaneuvered him.

The soldiers gambled for Jesus’ clothes, which fulfilled a prophecy from Psalm 22:18. Then Jesus asked John, identified in verse 26 as “the disciple whom he loved,” to take care of Mary. Even in his dying moments he was loving others, taking care of his widowed mother.

Victims of crucifixion died of asphyxiation. Hanging from a cross bar eventually would squeeze their lungs so they couldn’t breathe. They would then push up on their feet to open up their lungs, an incredibly painful effort. This went on for hours, in some cases for days, until the victim got so weak and exhausted they could no longer push up, then they’d die. When the executioners didn’t want to prolong the horror they would use an iron mallet to smash the legs of the victims so they could no longer push up. They would then die in relatively short order. The ancient Jews objected to leaving the dead bodies hanging there on a Sabbath, especially during Passover, so the soldiers set about smashing legs, but when they got to Jesus they found he was already dead. After Jesus was dead two of his admirers, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, got permission from Pilate to take the body of Jesus. They took it down from the cross, wrapped it in traditional burial clothes and spices, and put him in a tomb cut out of rock.

Jesus could have stopped that whole thing at any time. He could have simply avoided Jerusalem. If he had stayed out in the hinterlands the religious authorities would mostly have ignored him. Jesus also had the power to stop those who arrested him if he wanted to. He had given a small demonstration of that when they came to take him and he essentially knocked down the arresting soldiers like so many bowling pins. He had reminded Peter that if we wanted to stop what was happening all he had to do was whistle up some angels. But he did none of that, because it was his purpose to die to rescue humans.

In Mark 10:45 Jesus had told his followers, speaking of himself, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” He specifically came to give his life. In John 12:27 shortly before these events occurred Jesus was deeply apprehensive about what was coming and said, “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.” He knew what was about to happen, and he was horrified by it. It was the last thing he wanted to do because he was totally aware of how awful it was going to be. But he said this was the very reason for him coming into the world. This was his purpose, and he chose it with a steely resolve.

Isn’t it interesting that little kids freak out about getting a shot? You’d think some horrifying thing was being done to them, but they’re just getting stuck with a tiny needle that causes little more than a pinch. I actually have more empathy for them after last year. My treatments for cancer involved infusions every 3 or 4 weeks. Every time they started with blood tests where they kept filling up all these tubes with my blood. It felt like they were leaving me about a quart low. But they put in an IV line through which they would give the infusion, so that thing had to stay in for much of the day. It wasn’t horrible, but it got uncomfortable and was always a relief when they took it out. It just wasn’t great having something sticking in my arm. Now imagine having not a tiny needle sticking in your arm, but iron spikes driven through your hands and feet and left there all day. The horror of that is unimaginable. That was only one part of the pain Jesus willingly endured on that cross. He could have done something about it, but he deliberately chose it. He made it clear that it was what he had come into the world to do. But why?

JESUS CHOSE THIS BECAUSE IT WAS NECESSARY

Jesus did and said a lot of things while he was on the planet. There were many good things he could have done. He healed a lot of people and he fed some hungry people. Given his power and resources, we can think of a lot of things he could have done that would have made life much better for people in that day. But he said he came into this world specifically to die. That was the most important thing. He could have cured cancer or ended hunger or any number of amazing things that would have improved life on earth, but he made it clear that if he did those things and did not die the way he did, his life would have been a failure. It was the most important thing he did.

I’m going to admit I’ve done this. Have you ever gone to the grocery store to pick up one item that your spouse asks you to get, and on the way you think of a few other things you need. Then at the store you see a couple of things you want. So you get home with a couple of bags of groceries. Your wife looks through them and then asks where’s the one thing she sent you you to get. And you say, “Oh, um, I think I forgot it. Oops.” You didn’t do the one thing that was the whole point of the trip. I just want to point out that the time I did that was many years ago when I was so young no one thought, “Uh oh, looks like dementia is in the house.” More to the point, Jesus made it crystal clear that dying was the point of his trip to this planet. Had he done a host of wonderful things but didn’t do that, he would have failed in his whole purpose for being alive.

Why was his death necessary? Why did it matter more than anything else? That is because his death addressed the biggest, most important issue the human race faces. His death was a shocking, extreme thing that no one would ever anticipate for a Messiah, for God intervening in human history. That it was so awful and surprising says this was absolutely necessary, that it was dealing with the most intractable and impactful problem that all humans face.

Back in 2003 President George Bush gave the green light to an invasion of Iraq by a coalition of forces led by the US. It was a highly controversial action. Iraq was led by a megalomanic, unpredictable nightmare of a dictator named Saddam Hussein. No one was surprised by anything he did because he was so brutal. There was a consensus among intelligence agencies around the world that he was in possession of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. The world would not be a safe place with such terribly destructive weapons under the control of a man crazy enough to use them. Many felt that threat justified what was done. Of course, we know now that no such weapons were discovered in the end. What then would justify such a radical action as an invasion? If the President had said, “Well, we didn’t find any WMD’s, but we did discover that Iraq was the major world trafficker in cilantro, and we’ve put a stop to that,” most people would not consider that an acceptable reason for that invasion. I might, but I would be in a very small minority. A thing as drastic as an invasion requires something huge to justify it. My point here is that the enormity of what Jesus willingly and purposely did is only justified if it was to deal with the most serious issue facing the human race. And that is precisely what it did.

I am going to assert something that most of our world would not agree with, but it is a central tenet taught in the Bible, and it is at the very heart of Jesus’ teaching and motivation. This tenet is that the core problem of the human race is that we are separated from God. To be whole and have fullness of life we need to have a connection to God, and we don’t. That is the problem Jesus came to solve through his death. Ephesians 2:12 describes our former state as, “separate from Christ…foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world.” Colossians 1:21 says, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds.” This is the natural, beginning state of every human being. It’s not just some bad people. Every single one of us is born into that condition, with one exception. If you have human DNA, this is how you started life.

Is this alienation really humanity’s biggest and deepest problem? Many would say no. They might say the problem is poverty, or oppression, or injustice, or abuse or some other terrible ill. Those are all awful things, but they aren’t the root of our problems, they, in fact, are a result of the root problem, a symptom of it. The core problem is alienation from God, and a little thought will begin to shine a light on the magnitude of the issue. Acts 3:15 says God is “the author of life.” He wrote the book of life. Think about what that means. As you all know, I have written a couple of novels. The first one, called *One More Tomorrow*, took place on Maui and had a central character named Eric Mason. There was also a key character named Stacy Storm. Without me, there is no Eric Mason, no Stacy Storm, no *One More Tomorrow*. I’m the source of all of it. No Rick Myatt, no book, and think of how impoverished the world would be if that happened. All 15 people who read it would never have had the chance to have their lives enriched by it. God is the author of life. He is the author of all of it. Without him none of it exists. That’s what we mean when we say he is the Creator.

To be separated from God then, is to be separated from the source of life. Obviously if we were totally cut off from God, who sustains all of life, we would cease to exist. But Jesus said he came that we might have life to the full. There is a difference between existing and being truly, fully alive. That fullness of life, that experiencing life as God intended, comes from him. If we are separated from him then we will be separated from that life. This becomes a huge issue when we see that God is the source of love, peace, good and joy. To be separated from him is to be cut off from love, peace, good and joy, and that is a miserable existence.

Laurie and I live in the Vallecitos Water District. They have pipes that bring water to our house. All the water we get comes through their system. There have been a couple of occasions in the past 34 years that we have lived in our house where they had to make repairs or upgrades on their system. They notify us that the water will be shut off for several hours on the designated day. I usually forget and go to the kitchen to get a drink of water. But we are cut off from the source, so no water comes out of the faucet. If this goes on for very long it can be a problem, because I need water. I will need to find it. I see this problem with Toby and Anna’s dogs. If they don’t have water they will try to find it, and sometimes end up drinking out of the toilet. That’s not a good solution.

If we are cut off from true life, from love, peace, good and joy, we will go looking for it. We need it. We are desperate for it. But if you are cut off from the source you won’t be able to get it. You’ll try to find it in the spiritual equivalent of drinking out of the toilet, but you won’t find it. You will go around aware that you need something, trying all kinds of things to fill that need, but never getting what you are desperate for. It will distort your soul. It creates all the dysfunction and evil and conflict we see in our race.

Our world says what we most need is more justice, more abundance, maybe more education, better health care, and any number of things. Those are all good things, but if you are alienated from the source of life, good, love, joy and peace, you can alleviate some pain by having justice and abundance, you can become more educated and healthier, but you will still be alienated from the thing you need most, and at some level you’ll sense that.

As you all know about 18 months ago I was diagnosed with the rarest form of malignant melanoma. It is called desmoplastic melanoma. I’d never heard of it until the doctor told me I had it. It presents itself on the skin. They cut out the first indication they found of it. They needed to do that, but unfortunately that wasn’t going to solve the problem. The cells of the disease spread under the skin, particularly on nerves that lie just under the surface. The disease will pop up at various places on the skin, but if the doctors try to address all of those they’ll be playing whack a mole, dealing with surface issues while the disease is in the process of spreading and eventually killing the patient. The only way to defeat the disease is to actually cure it. That’s like what happens with humans. The disease is alienation from God. It has many manifestations. People tend to put all their effort into treating the manifestations, but if you don’t cure the disease, in the end your efforts will be futile. Jesus came to cure the disease of alienation and separation from God, which is at the heart of everything that is wrong with us.

But how does Jesus dying solve the problem? To get to that we have to understand why all humans are separated from God. It is common to think that if we are separated from God it is because we do some things he says we shouldn’t. We do things he might call sins, and these sins cause the rupture between us and God. But if that’s the problem, Jesus dying wouldn’t help. Instead, he should have pointed out what we’re doing wrong and urged us to do better. Just try harder to not do those things and all will be good. The fact that Jesus said he came to die tells us that’s not the problem.

The problem is much deeper. It is that something has gone wrong with us. Something about our very nature has gotten twisted. It is like there is a disease in our souls, and this disease pollutes everything we do. We can even do a good thing, but this disease infects it and taints it. We can never fix this thing by trying harder, because the problem is us. The giveaway that this thing is wrong in us is that we make ourselves the center of everything. We can’t help it. We essentially substitute ourselves for God as the center of all. This is the cause of all of the conflict, all of the woes and suffering of the human race.

Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is death. The Bible calls this thing in us sin. We all know it’s there because we can never free ourselves from our addiction to self. Oh, we can get a little better at it, but we can never completely change it. God has said since the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3 that the consequence of this thing is death, or separation from the author of life.

Why would God make such a draconian consequence the penalty for that disease in us? It is because that thing in us is actually evil. By definition evil corrupts and destroys. Well I’m not that bad. Yeah, here’s the problem. How much evil is too much? Even a little tiny bit will eventually cause pain, suffering and destruction somehow, and if God is good, he can’t ignore that. He has to eradicate that.

Think again about my disease. The treatment was to give me relatively new drugs, monoclonal antibody drugs that ramp up and aid my immune system so that it can attack and kill the cancer at the cellular level inside my body. It has been successful at that, so I am melanoma free right now as far as they know. But the problem is, if my immune system hasn’t eradicated those cancer cells, the ones that are left will proliferate and ultimately could kill me. That’s what cancer cells do. So how many cancer cells do you want in your system? I’d prefer exactly zero. The spiritual problem for us is tiny bits of evil are like those deadly cells. God must condemn and deal with all of them. The treatment is death. Anything less leaves deadly evil cells in place to destroy.

Now we see why Jesus came to die. He took the treatment in our place. He died so we don’t have to. Can he do that? Yes, because he is without evil he can. And his death serves for the entire human race because he is infinite. His infinite being can solve the problem of the infinity of human sin and evil. There is something of a divine mystery here. We don’t have all the answers as to how that fixes us. But we do know that God has said Jesus’ death was necessary to repair the rupture that has separated us from him. Being reunited with him reconnects our pipeline to life, love, peace and joy, and it allows him to begin working to restore us by removing all the evil in us. That process won’t be complete in our lifetimes on this planet, but some day it will be. We couldn’t fix that problem by trying harder any more than I could have cured my cancer by trying harder to make it go away.

CRUCIFIXION WAS THE METHOD

One question that has rattled around in my brain is why did Jesus have to be crucified? I get that he had to die, but why that way? One evidence of the problem with human beings is that we have gotten far more effective and efficient when it comes to ways of killing each other. In the first century the options for that were somewhat limited. Basically, to eliminate another human you could poison them, you could stab or slash them with something sharp like a knife or a sword, or you could try to beat them to death. That was pretty much it.

These days we have more weapons that are good at ending life. The Romans in the first century didn’t have those, but they were creative. They gave some thought to how they could make people die in the most awful way possible. They wanted to find a method so painful and awful that it would scare people away from doing anything that would have even the hint of a chance of causing them to incur that penalty. Crucifixion was their answer.

Why, then, did Jesus have to die like that? He didn’t do anything close to deserving of such a horrifying execution. Even in that day there were quicker, less grotesque ways of killing people. If Jesus had to die, why not have him simply run through the heart with a spear, or even cut off his head? It would be horrifying, but not torture. Nothing in the Scriptures lays out the reason for this, so we don’t know for certain. But there are a couple of hints that point us in the direction of a couple of reasons for this.

The first has to do with giving us a picture of the horror of evil. When we choose to go our way instead of God’s we are opting for something other than true good. God is the truest form of good. When we replace him with our way rather than his, we are replacing good with something else. If it’s not good, what is it? It is evil. It is not just neutral, but it is rejection of true good. I believe that in part Jesus went through that horror because we need to see what our evil causes. It is like God was giving us a graphic visual aid of what we are causing when we choose our way over him.

I believe that is part of the reason, but there is another aspect that is not so cautionary. Something we all know is that when we hurt, the people who can care for us the best are others who know what we are going through because they’ve experienced it. The people who can help us the most are those who have suffered as we are suffering.

Isaiah 53, written hundreds of years before he came, prophesies what will happen to Messiah. In verse 4 the prophet said of him, “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering.” Verse 3 says, “He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, familiar with pain.” All of us have experienced pain. We have all suffered. We have all been rejected in some way. The cross of Jesus says loudly that he understands and feels all of it with us. Whatever we have gone through, it is not as awful as what he experienced in this life. The pain, the total rejection, the horror of his torture and execution was far beyond anything we have gone through. He went through that because he loves us so much he wanted us to know that he understands. He literally feels our pain and cares about us. He is the farthest thing from immune to our suffering. He sympathizes with us in it.

IMPLICATIONS

TRUST THAT JESUS’ WORK IS COMPLETE

It is finished. Jesus came to fix the root problem of the human race. He came to restore us back to God. Theologians call that reconciliation. He came to reconnect us to God and remove that alienation. That is something that every human aches for, whether they know it or not. We often do not. We sense a need, but we’re like dogs drinking out of the toilet. We keep looking in places that we hope will fix the ache, but they never will accomplish it.

Baseball season had a soft opening this past week with 2 Padre games, and opens fully late this week. I wouldn’t be surprised if in the coming days I stumble on and watch at least a little of one of my all time favorite movies, *Field Of Dreams*. I’ve mentioned it many times. There is a scene at the end where the main character, Ray Kinsella, has a chance to connect with his dad, from whom he was estranged. His dad had died, but magically he shows up alive on the baseball field Ray bizarrely built in his cornfield. Ray heard, “If you build it, he will come.” He had no idea that the “he” was his own father. In that scene he reconnects with his dad, healing a deep wound. I get choked up every time I see that scene. It’s stupid that I get a lump in my throat every time. I’ve seen that scene many times, I know what’s coming, and still I get teary eyed. Laurie does the same thing. The weird part about that is neither of us has had any estrangement from our dads. We had good, loving relationships with our parents. We did not need to be reconciled to them. So why is that scene so powerful for us? Because in every human there is a profound longing for reconciliation. We need to be reconnected, only we’re not clear on to whom. The connection we need, the reconciliation, is with God. Even after we have been reconnected to God through Christ we feel that longing because we want to be face to face with him.

When Jesus said, “It is finished” he was saying the job was done. The hole in the dam has been plugged. The rupture is fixed. There is nothing separating us from God. It’s a done deal. It’s all over. Jesus came to heal the alienation we have from God, and when he said, “It is finished” he meant that he had accomplished that. He did it totally. There is nothing left to fix our relationship with God except for us to accept what Jesus has done for us. He offers that healing as a gift. We just receive it. That’s it. We can add nothing to it.

Sometimes we have trouble believing that is true. Can everything between us and God really be fixed? It doesn’t feel like it, in part because we keep thinking, saying and doing things that are dismaying and not at all what God wants. Maybe God forgave our stuff in the past, but we keep seeing these things in our lives. Surely he hasn’t forgiven that, has he? Colossians 2:13-14 says, “When you were dead in your sin and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us ***all*** our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.” He pictures a document with all the charges that could ever be made against us in our entire life, past, present and even in the future. Everything we ever have done or ever will do that is not perfectly good and holy, everything we are, everything wrong with us, is on that document. In Christ, God has canceled it. There is a penalty for all of it, every little bit. But the penalty is death, and Jesus paid it. There is nothing more that is needed. It is finished. Done. Forever.

Laurie and I bought our Nissan Rogue as a used car in 2017. We traded in our previous vehicle and put some money down, but in order to buy it we had to borrow the bulk of the money it cost from the San Diego County Credit Union. We made a payment of $371 on that loan every month for years. We did that faithfully. Last year late in August we were informed that we had one more payment to make. We made that payment in September. After that the certificate of debt against us, as Paul called it, was canceled. The debt we owed was completely paid. What do you think the credit union would do if I went there this week and said, “I’ve been feeling uneasy and guilty because I haven’t paid you anything now for half a year. I’m here to make up for that. What do I need to do?” I’ll tell you what they’d do. They’d look at me like I was a little green man who arrived in a flying saucer. They’d think I’m nuttier than a peanut patty. They’d say, “You can’t do anything. You don’t owe us anything. You have no obligation whatsoever. Your debt has been paid. It’s over.”

When we struggle with believing that God has forgiven us and we start thinking we need to somehow make up for our failings, when we go to God and said, “What do I need to do?” He looks at us like we are daffier than Daffy Duck. He says, “You can’t do anything. You have no obligation whatsoever. Your debt has been paid. All of it. It’s over.” That is what Jesus was telling us when he said, “It is finished.” He meant it. It’s for real. His work of enabling us to be reconnected to God was done. It is 100% complete, now and forever.

LIVE CONNECTED

Yes, sometimes we feel guilt before God. But he only offers us forgiveness. We need to let the truth of what Jesus did, the fact of our forgiveness, rule even over our fleeting feelings. We need to rejoice that it is finished and we are fully loved, forgiven and accepted in God’s presence.

Jesus didn’t say, “Most of it is done. Now it’s your turn. I’m handing it over to you to finish the job.” He said it is finished, 100% complete. The penalty was death and he paid it. What are we going to add to that? A little more death? We tend to think we still have a weed problem. The weeds keep coming back and we have to keep pulling them out. Are there weeds in our lives? Yes. But those weeds do not cause a rupture in our relationship with God. That separation has been repaired permanently and nothing can undo that repair. No weeds ever come between us and God. We deal with the weeds in our lives not because it makes us more acceptable to God, for it does not. We do it because we want more beauty and joy in our lives.

This is crucial because all of us want love, peace, joy, and fullness of life. In the end those all come from God. We only experience the fullness of them to the degree that we are connected to him, letting his goodness and love and grace flow into us and fill our hearts and lives. So the dominant response to what Jesus has done should be gratitude. Thank him continually. Then live in his presence, looking to him, so that his goodness, his love, his peace, his joy, his life will flow into us.