

**Releasing the Captives**  
**Part 3: The Power of Love and the Prison of Social Sin**  
**Text: Revelation 21:10**  
**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**  
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The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a remarkable time in history. It was an era when hopes were high for the transformation of the world. People believed that the world was becoming a more loving and just place. People believed that women were helping the world to become this way. This was the era when women lobbied for the right to vote. It was the era which gave birth to Mother's Day. It was the era that created some *deeply* inspirational music: *Onward, Christian Soldiers, The Holy City* and others.

It was called the Progressive Era. And some hoped-for reforms did happen. Women did get the vote. Workplace health and safety legislation was enacted. Some of the world's nations moved from the injustice of laissez-faire capitalism to a more balanced economy with the market and government working together to create prosperity.

In the Church as well it was a time of reform. In fact, reforms in the Church fuelled reforms in the world. Christianity discovered the dual concepts of *social* sin and social salvation. Sin was understood not simply as individual acts of disobedience to God and individual acts which hurt others; no, the Church discovered that sin is also a *social* concept. It's a sin when workers labour in unhealthy conditions for low wages. It's a sin when nations settle their disputes through war. It's a sin when companies risk environmental degradation in the pursuit of greater profits. Surely any harmful thing that we might do or say to each other pales in comparison to the harm being done at this very moment to the Gulf of Mexico by that massive oil slick. To harm God's Creation is a sin. *And*, it's *also* a sin when the Church divides itself into social enclaves called denominations, rather than coming together into the one body for which Jesus prayed (John 17:23). Thus this Progressive Era also saw the founding of the modern ecumenical movement and the creation of ecumenical bodies such as The United Church of Canada.

Sin is *at least* as much a social phenomenon as it is an individual phenomenon. As a human community we are trapped by war and injustice and the destruction of God's Creation at *least* as much as we are trapped by the sins that we have committed against others and the sins that others have committed against us. The *whole world* is trapped in the prison of sin. And a church divided against itself is not helping to free the captives.

How do we get out of it? How do we as a human community break out of this prison of sin? How do we tear down that third prison wall? Because, you see, the mission of the Church is to *destroy* that prison. Not just to dig an escape tunnel, but to tear down all four prison walls; the third wall – the wall of the world's sins, the wall of social sin – no less than the first two walls: which are, the sins that we've committed and the sins that others have committed against us.

How do we break out? It seems to me that the prison walls are razed by the Risen Christ. It is the redemptive love of Jesus which tears down those walls. The good news of the Gospel sets the captives free. Remember how Jesus stood up in the synagogue to preach his inaugural sermon? He said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free” (see Luke 4:16-21). The powerful love of Jesus Christ breaks down those prison walls! And empowered and transformed by the love of the Christ, we have our part to play in releasing the world from the captivity of social sin. As individuals and as the Church, we have our part to play.

Let’s first be clear that the vision of the Gospel is that the *whole world* will be saved. Not just individuals, but the whole world. John 3:16 says, “God so loved *the world* that God gave his only Son.” In Matthew, the Risen Christ commissions his followers to “Go and make disciples of *all* nations” (Matthew 28:19). And in the Revelation to John, when we see the vision of the consummation of salvation history, it is a *massive city* that we see as the completion of God’s saving work. Not some loose collection of individual believers, but a city, a *community*. Salvation has to do with the *social* dimension of life. With individuals, yes, but also with the *social* dimension; with *community*; with the *whole world*.

What are the characteristics of this community, this Holy City, this New Jerusalem? First of all, it is a sight to behold: covered in jewels and embossed in gold. Secondly, it is ablaze in light. And most importantly, its gates are wide open (Revelation 21:25). *All* are welcomed there. Yes, the Bible says that “nothing unclean will enter it” (Revelation 21:27), but the implication is that by the end of history *all* will have been made clean. The grace of God will have wiped away every sin, every tear, every manifestation of evil. Last week we heard that when this Holy City completes history, death will be no more; neither will there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore (Revelation 21:4). Well, if death and crying and pain will be no more, then war will be no more, homelessness will be no more, injustice will be no more. The *whole world* has been made clean; the whole world has been saved. The grace and power and love of God will do this.

The whole world is to be saved. Salvation is ultimately a *social* phenomenon. But it begins with an individual. It begins with Jesus. And it begins with you. What are *you* doing to save the world? What are you doing to break down the prison wall of social sin?

You can begin by forgiving those who have hurt you. Our focus last week – forgiving others – is crucial to bringing salvation to the world. Tearing down the second prison wall makes the third wall that much easier to topple. Because, you see, saving the world is all about loving your enemies. We kill enemies, we oppress enemies. But if we *love* our enemies – if they become our friends – then there’s no one to kill or oppress! And the best way to love your enemies is to forgive them. Forgive those who’ve sinned against you, forgive those who’ve become enemies because you’re so angry at them; forgive them, and through

the mystery of God's grace you start a ripple effect which brings forgiveness and healing to the whole world.

Psalm 23 speaks of a table that the Lord prepares for us in the presence of our enemies. It's the table of grace, where we can offer hospitality to those who've hurt us. Enemies become friends, and the prison wall of war and injustice comes tumbling down.

In the summer of 1968 – in the wake of the heart breaking murders of Dr. Martin Luther King and Senator Robert Kennedy – I went to church camp with a bunch of rednecks from southern Illinois. At least, rednecks is how I perceived them. Some wonderfully deranged person had the vision of creating a church camp which would include White teenagers from southern Illinois and inner city teenagers – both Black and White – from Chicago. The only thing we had in common was that we were all Christians, but at the beginning of the week we might not have admitted even that.

Now you might think of Illinois as a northern state, but southern Illinois is further south than Richmond, Virginia; the capital of the old Confederacy during the Civil War. And in the 1960's in the United States we were still fighting the Civil War. When that camp full of young people sat down to dinner that first night, we were sharing a table with our enemies.

But you know, with God all things are possible. By the end of the week we were friends. It was a tough week, but in the end we were friends. Racism and self-righteousness are among the sins that tear the world apart. But working together and talking together and fighting together and playing together and the Spirit of the Risen Christ working together through all of these things helps people to be brought together. Forgiveness and understanding help to save the world from sin.

We can be Christ's disciples in saving the world from sin first by forgiving our enemies and secondly by working for the unity of the whole church. Jesus prayed that *all* of his followers might be one so that the world might believe; so that the world might be saved (John 17:21). Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu who was influenced by the teachings of Jesus, was asked why he hadn't become a Christian. Gandhi responded, "What kind of Christian do you want me to be?" The denominational and doctrinal divisions in the Church compromise the Church's message of love and are counterproductive to the work of salvation. Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists had the right idea in 1925 when they formed The United Church of Canada, and again in 1968 when the Evangelical United Brethren were welcomed into the fold. A church union roughly every 40 years. Time for another one. I can think of no better way to celebrate the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Church Union than by making renewed overtures to the Anglicans and the Presbyterians. A Church which overcomes its own divisions is better able to save a divided world.

We can be Christ's disciples in saving the world from sin by forgiving our enemies, working for the unity of the whole church and seeking to bring God's saving grace into every aspect of our individual and collective lives. Politics,

economics, education, science and so on: all spheres of human life need to be saved. This was Gandhi's point when he spoke of the seven deadly social sins:

1. Politics without principle
2. Wealth without work
3. Commerce without mortality
4. Pleasure without conscience
5. Education without character
6. Science without humanity
7. Worship without sacrifice

In the final analysis, the salvation of the world is the work of God. The New Jerusalem is not a tower of Babel that we build up to the heavens, but a Holy City which God brings down to earth. So perhaps the most important way that we can seek social salvation is to pray. Reinhold Niebuhr said that we should work as if the coming of the Kingdom depends totally on us, and pray as if it depends totally on God. The future is in God's hands. And God will accomplish God's purpose. Amen.