

## A Clean Set of Clothes

By Tom Westra

Some Sundays it's louder than others, but every Sunday it's there. That voice whispering: "You? You are stepping onto that chancel to speak for a holy God? Are you *kidding* me?"

Like a courtroom prosecutor, it badgers, "Remember what you did last week? ...what kind of husband you have been? ...the angry and impatient words you directed at your wife? How does she look you in the eye as you stand up there, 'as a called servant of Christ'? Remember the guy with the addiction who came for help? Remember thinking, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, like this addict'? How dare you put on a stole on Sundays when you've put yourself on a pedestal all week?"

It's relentless. "You slandered your co-worker. You gossiped about your neighbor. And your thoughts? Do I need to go there? What if your congregation could see your impure thoughts playing on a screen? Everyone would walk out the door in disgust—including the guy who came with the addiction. How dare you stand in the pulpit and point to the sins of anyone else? Hypocrite!"

The voice has been around a long time...ever since Eden. It has long tormented God's servants.

*Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him.... Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel (Zechariah 3:1,3).*

When our hearts condemn us, we can talk to a Circuit Pastor, Christian counselor, or a trusted brother. Often—though repentant—we want to hide our sins, but that can prolong the struggle. The value of private confession isn't merely accountability, but hearing that God is greater than our hearts and knows all things...and forgives us.

Like Joshua, we know what it is to stand before the LORD in filthy clothes. We've not done the good we want. And the evil we abhor, we've done. We know the struggle. We wear our sins like filthy garments. We know what it is to cry out in brokenness "what a wretched man I am."

*We know what it is to cry out in our brokenness, "what a wretched man that I am."*

And the Accuser, when he smells blood in the water, circles in for the kill. "God cannot use a dirty servant like you."

Thankfully, Joshua did not stand alone with Satan. Neither do we.

*The LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?"*

*The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." Then he said to Joshua, "See I have taken away your sin and I will put rich garments on you." Then I said, "Put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by" (2,4,5).*

Satan's ugly accusations may be true. We have done what he alleges—and more. No matter. The LORD snatched us from the fire by letting the fire of divine wrath against sin burn over his Son at Calvary's cross.

The sin-soiled garments we wore are removed by his sacrifice. In their place we receive a clean set of clothes—the perfect obedience of Christ. Paul Gerhardt said it well,

*Your blood my royal robe shall be, my joy beyond all measure!  
Your righteousness shall be my crown; with these I need not  
hide me. (CW 219)*

Now God does not see our failures. Instead, he sees in us only the obedience of his Son, of whom he said, “with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17; 17:5). “Ever since my baptism, I wear that obedience as my own. The Father’s words of approval resound over me....” (Richard Gurgel, PTW Jan/Feb, 2012; emphasis added).

Now that we are dressed in Christ’s obedience, Satan’s accusations are lies. He might as well remain silent.

But we are not silent. Dressed in the rich garments of Christ’s obedience, we are very bold. We have work to do. And it is never in vain. We must point others to Jesus.



## Sir, we would see Jesus.

I think I read it in a devotion book by Herman Gockel years ago; but it stuck with me. A congregation was getting a steady dose of law heavy sermons. One Saturday night the pastor found a note taped to the pulpit. It read, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus” (John 12:21). The pastor took it to heart. Next Saturday he found another note. “The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord” (John 20:20).

Of all the comments and suggestions I received in my informal survey on preaching in the WELS, these were by far the most prevalent.

- *Preach Christ. Preach that he lived, died, and rose again for me.*
- *Convict me with the law and refresh me with the cross and the resurrection. This truly is a ‘good’ sermon regardless of creativity or preaching style.*
- *I want to know Jesus.*

Otherwise, how will we see our need and run to Christ as our only shelter from the storm of God’s well-deserved wrath?” (Wendland, p. 7)

*“Focus on the sins that trouble those of us sitting in the pew . . . not the sins of those who failed to show up for church this morning.”*

*Pastor, I unload trucks for a living. I don’t necessarily have the same skill set that you have developed in your line of work. Making inferences is not always easy for me. Don’t be condescending, but at the same time don’t assume I can make the*

## Tell me that I am a sinner.

*I know that seems foreign to you, a preacher of the Gospel. But only when I despair of who I am and what I do can you lead me to the Lamb of God who takes away my sin.*

*Pastor, on this side of heaven I will never outgrow the need to be made aware of my desperate and damnable condition apart from Christ.*

*“How easy it is to think (after God gives us new life by the Spirit), ‘I can finish this up on my own!’ The law reveals just how deeply sin has sunk its roots in us.... Without the law we begin to think we can do it on our own, and lose our thirst for the righteousness that comes only by faith. Without the law to discipline our old Adam, we grow slack and sloppy, and thus show contempt for grace” (Paul Wendland, “How God Grows Christians,” p. 5, WLS essay file).*

*Please don’t just focus on the behavior of people outside the church—politicians, celebrities, and members who failed to show up for church this morning. Focus on the sins that trouble those of us in the pew (internet pornography, materialism, divorce, not loving our wives as Christ loved the church, dishonesty in the workplace, not keeping the one thing needful the priority in my life).*

*Help me see my sin for the damnable act it really is—making me worthy of God’s punishment now and for eternity. Help me see that my sinful nature makes me powerless, apart from Christ.*



connections between your sermon and my life just because those connections are obvious to you. Speak plainly and be specific.

Focus on clear, specific law and gospel within a text and then apply them to my life. A generic “you have sinned” followed by a generic “you are forgiven” followed by a detailed and lengthy explanation of how I should now live doesn’t come across as preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins, but as thinly veiled moralism.

Include yourself here pastor—although in this case without specifics. I don’t want to hear about the fight you had last night with your wife. But include yourself God’s condemnation. I prefer a doctor who’s spent some time in a hospital bed. It helps me know my shepherd understands and shares in my struggle. It helps me know you are not preaching law to browbeat me into being a better person—like you—but rather to lead me to the healing you have found.

## Tell me that I am saved.

“When the Law has made the iron red hot, immediately apply the Gospel and shape it into a proper form” (*Law and Gospel, A Reader’s Edition*, CPH, 2010, p. 465).

*Pastor, I didn’t come to church today to learn to handle my finances or how to better my marriage (although I am interested in God’s will for me). I came to find rest for my soul. I came to see Jesus.*

*“Pastor, I didn’t come to church today to learn how to handle my finances. I came to see Jesus.”*

“We look to Christ and find someone who is everything we are not and fail to be. We look to Christ and find someone who met every good expectation—not only of man, but also of God. We look to Christ and find someone whose bitter sufferings and death cover up all our sin. ‘This he did for me.’ We say, ‘according to God’s own Word, it counts as if I did it. And his death for sin counts as if I died already for my sin. This is God’s verdict, not man’s, and so it stands forever no matter what I or others feel.” Christ is who I am before God!” (Wendland, p. 8)

*Again, please give me specifics. Don’t ever assume I know the gospel so you can quickly move on to Christian living.*

*“Don’t ever assume I know the gospel so you can quickly move on to Christian living.”*

“But when you struggle with sin, you will realize that the Gospel is a rare guest in a person’s conscience, whereas the Law is a familiar and daily companion” (*Law and Gospel*, p. 32).

*And again, Pastor, include yourself. Speak the gospel from personal experience. Let me see your joy in your forgiveness.*

“Think of the time when you will be the pastor of a congregation, and make a vow to God that you will ... not stand in your pulpit with a sad face (as if you were asking people to come to a funeral), but like men who are wooing a bride or who are announcing a wedding.... When you become pastors, you become helpers of Christian joy. Do not become pastors who irritate and torture people, filling them with uncertainty and causing them to go home from church heavy-hearted” (*Law and Gospel*, p. 458-459).

*“Speak the gospel from personal experience. Let me see your joy in your forgiveness.”*

*Make sure I know what grace is. Make sure I know there’s nothing I can do to make God love me more—no amount of church attendance or offering of time or money. He already loves me with all the love of an infinite God. Make sure I know there’s nothing I can do to make God love me less—no amount of pornography, or back-stabbing gossip, or sinful pride. My sin will not diminish his love for me. Make sure I know his response to my miserable failures is always, “I love you.” Make sure I know that when God said he loved the world, he meant the crack head down the street, the prostitute on the corner, the murderer in the state pen, and yes, even a wretch like me. Tell me there is no condemnation for me because God already punished all these sins in his Son on the cross. Make sure I know Christian failures will walk into heaven rejoicing.*

“Luther preaches in such a way as to lay hold of any doubting listener and drag him out of his doubts, compelling him to believe he is a child of God and would die saved if he were to die that night. Praise God, if only that testimony were given about you when you enter the ministry! . . . May it never be said that we stepped out of the pulpit without preaching enough Gospel so that someone who was sitting there for the first and the last time is not saved” (*Law and Gospel* p. 461-462).

## Tell me how to respond.

*Now that you’ve equipped me for good works, point me in the right direction. Show me how to use this section of Scripture in my life and in my contacts with others this week. Again, I crave specifics!*

“I preach the very thing that alone can change their hearts so that they will do good works” (*Law and Gospel*, p. 463).

“Christians long to be taught God’s will. We prize that will since it is the will of our dear Father. And we know we need to be taught.... However, we don’t presuppose the willingness in the sense that we take the gospel for granted and never more speak of it again. The gospel permeates this kind of encouragement through and through. The gospel remains the beating heart, the heart set free” (Wendland, p. 10).

*“Now that you have equipped me for good works, point me in the right direction.”*

*Pastor, I don’t want to be critical. I know how difficult your task is. But if you do this clumsily, if you do this badly, you drive me back under a cloud of despair.*

“Confusion of law and gospel may creep in ... when we present the gospel and then follow it up with an encouragement to sanctification which treats the new life as something a Christian ought now to be able to produce instead of as something God produces” (*Preach the Gospel*, NPH, 1978, p. 9).

*“If you do this clumsily, you drive me back under a cloud of despair.”*

*If you preach law and then gospel and then more law (i.e. a plea to do this or that), I leave feeling burdened all over again. End with the Gospel! Make sure, if you are preach the law near the end of the sermon as a guide to Christian living, to clearly spell out the motivation. Make sure that I know I am being urged to do these things as an expression of thanks and love and not as a way to prove myself worthy of God’s love.*

“In view of God’s mercy ... offer your bodies as living sacrifices” (Romans 12:1).

*And, Pastor, because I am a saint and a sinner, help me to remember what Paul taught in Romans 7, that my life of sanctification will be a struggle. Don’t let me fall into despair when I see sin continues to be part of my life and I am doing badly at living for my Savior. Don’t give me the impression that the strength for Christian living comes from me trying harder or “getting my faith swagger on” but rather from looking to Christ and his perfect obedience which now counts for me.*

“[Here is] the bottom-line question every preacher should ask at the end of each sermon: When my listeners walk out the

doors of this sanctuary to perform God’s will, with whom do they walk? If they march to battle the world, the flesh, and the devil with only me, myself, and I, then each parades to despair. However, if the sermon has led all persons to God’s grace, then they may walk into the world with their Savior—and with fresh hope” (Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, Baker, 2005, p. 295).

## What if Jesus isn’t in the text?

In this issue I have encouraged you to preach Jesus. But what if the text doesn’t specifically mention Jesus or the gospel? What then?

I don’t think it’s a matter of playing “where’s Jesus” in this text like a game of “where’s Waldo?” But Jesus did say, “These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39).

“No text exists in isolation from other texts or from the overarching biblical message.... Some meanings we discern by taking out our exegetical magnifying glass and studying a text’s particulars in close detail. Other meanings we discern by examining a text with a theological fish-eye lens to see how the immediate text relates to (the context). Accurate expositors use both a magnifying glass and a fish-eye lens knowing that a magnifying glass can unravel mysteries in a raindrop but can fail to expose a storm gathering on the horizon....” (Chapell, p. 275).

With every text we must ask where this passage fits into God’s redemptive plan.

“You do not explain what an acorn is, even if you say many true things about it (e.g., it is brown, it has a cap, is found on the ground, is gathered by squirrels) if you do not in some way relate it to an oak tree. In a similar sense, [you] cannot properly explain a [text], even if you say many true things about it, unless you relate it to the redeeming work of God....” (Chapell, p. 276).

Paul wrote, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). It wasn’t that he taught nothing but the vicarious atonement. But the vicarious atonement was at the heart of everything that Paul taught. May it be so for us.

Jesus. Jesus. Only Jesus.

