Grace for a Clean Slate

Third in our series “Amazing Grace” for summer 2019

# Scripture: Romans 3:19-26; 5:12-19

# Key thought: By grace through the finished work of Jesus, our sins can be forgiven.

# Intro:

When the little school next door to our church was active during the 19th century, the children likely used slates to record their lessons. Slates were a piece of slate stone surrounded by a wooden frame. Children marked on them with chalk. Then they had to be erased so they could be used again. After several uses they needed to be more thoroughly cleaned like the chalk boards we remember in schoolrooms when we were children. This is how you got a clean slate.

When my daughter was a child there was a children’s toy that imitated a slate. It was a pad with a dark charcoal colored back page and a clear plastic top sheet. Pressing on the clear top sheet with a stylus produces a charcoal colored mark. When you were done writing, and you wanted to start again you just lifted the clear plastic sheet and the marks disappeared. You had a clean slate.

This morning, for purposes of illustration, I would like us to think of our lives as a slate with markings representing the many deeds of our days. Some of them we might like to be preserved. But there are many others that we would like to erase. And for many of us, there were some timeframes in our lives where we dearly wished for a clean slate.

# Everyone’s slate is dirty.

Come to think of it, everyone’s slate is dirtied up with some marks that they would like to have removed. This idea that all of our slates are dirty is one of the basic spiritual concepts of the Bible. People used to use the phrase “goody two-shoes” to refer to people who are good or at least they thought they were. But the truth is that no-one is truly good. The Bible says,

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom 3:23)

In NT times many Jews to whom Jesus and Paul spoke were quite content to agree that the life slates of their pagan neighbors were quite dirty. But they were also pretty certain that their own life records were clean. After all, they were not pagan idol worshippers. They were good Jews. They went to synagogue, they paid their tithe, they didn't swear. They were faithful to one wife, etc. There are many people like that today too—quick to point the finger and some others, but self-righteous and smug.

Yet even in the OT, David wrote;

The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one. Ps 14:2-3

God’s standard is a completely clean moral slate. He calls us to be holy as he is holy (1 Peter 1:16). But all of us were born with an independent streak that we inherited from Adam, our forefather. It is a bent that causes us to want to go our own way, to do what we want, rather than what God desires. As a result, all of us have had the experience of Adam on our own, the experience of knowing that something was wrong and but yet choosing deliberately to do it anyway. Our slates are all dirty! What can we say?

All of us are silent and guilty before God.

# A dirty slate is not fit for its purpose.

Now the second point is this. A dirty slate is not useful for its intended purpose. What do we do with a piece of paper that is used on both sides? We throw it away or light a fire with it. Maybe we can send it back for reprocessing but unless we can come out with clean paper again, it’s useless.

Now think about the analogy with our lives. God has good purposes for our lives. He tells us in Ephesians 2:10 that he has “good works prepared in advance for us to do.” God wants our lips to speak words of praise. God wants to etch his image upon our souls. God wants to help us fill the record of our lives with deeds of love. But with the slate of our lives covered with deeds of rebellion, selfishness and marks from unforgiven sins, we are not ready for God to use for his intended purposes. What is worse, we are not concerned.

One of the huge problems that contributes to the terrible state of our society today is that people are not worried at all if their slates are dirty before God. In fact, they don’t even believe in a God to whom they are responsible. But Jesus warned us,

“I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Luke 12:4, 5 NIV

Jesus told a parable that warned us also about being unfruitful which means not being useful for the purposes that God intended. We have an altogether too sanguine view of what it means to have our slates dirty and to be unfruitful in the tasks God has assigned us. Listen to Jesus’ take on it.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful… “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. (John 15:1-2, 5-6 NIV)

It’s a serious matter if our slates remain dirty and we remain not useful to the Master.

We think God cruel for holding us responsible for our dirty slates. But what else is he to do with us? We are not useful for the purposes for which he created us if we insist on keeping our dirty slates despite his offer to clean them. Like a naughty child marking on the wall again, we continue to incur the just wrath of our divine parent for our continued rebellion.

So a second idea that we have to understand is that the natural human has a hopelessly dirty slate which not only can they not clean, but they are always making worse.

# God offers us a clean slate.

Now we come to the heart of the matter. Now we get to the truly Good News! This is the key concept of this morning. It sometimes goes by a big word–justification. It means simply this. God, by his grace–there is our key word for this summer series– because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, has a solution. **God is making us an offer of a clean slate for free.** It’s not that we deserve this free offer, we can’t do anything to merit it. But God is offering it to all of us by grace. Listen to Paul use the word “grace” twice as he describes God’s proffered gift.

The gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Rom 5:15 NIV

The spiritual issues of the human race began with Adam. Human life slates have been getting dirty ever since. But the answer to the spiritual issues of the human race begins with Jesus. And that answer comes to us freely by God’s grace. Paul explained;

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Rom 3:23, 24 NIV

Adam was judged in the Garden of Eden for his sins. And we will be judged also for ours unless we are forgiven. The passage that we read in Romans 5 explains the contrast between what happens to us if we follow only Adam and what happens if we follow Jesus who offers to clean our slates. We didn’t have a choice in following Adam. It was our fate. But we have the precious opportunity to choose to follow Jesus, the one who offers to us by his grace the answer, the Rx, the complete solution to all the complications that have come upon us from the infamous fall of Adam.

I invite you to study Romans 5:16-20. List all the problems we suffer because of our sins that are listed in Romans 5:16-20 in one column. Then in a second column, delineate all the powerful salvation solutions Paul mentions that Jesus has provided for our healing.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Results of sin | Results of salvation in Christ |
| Rom. 5:16 | judgement and condemnation | Justification |
| Rom. 5:17 | death | Life |
| Rom. 5:18 | condemnation | Justification and life |
| Rom. 5:19 | marked as sinners | Made righteous |
| Rom. 5:20 | Sin increased | Grace increased more |

What a difference!

Now remember, this offer of a clean slate and all that goes with it is free to us, but it was not free to God. The Greek word in Romans 3:25 which the NIV and the NRSV translate as “sacrifice of atonement” refers to the atonement cover on the ark of the covenant in the OT. The KJV name for it is “mercyseat.” This is the place where the High Priest of the Jewish nation had to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, as a means of forgiveness for the sins of Israel. It was also the place where God chose to display his presence with glory and by speaking from there on occasion. Here in Romans, by using this loaded word, Paul is pointing out to us that Jesus is now our place of mercy. His shed blood is our plea for forgiveness. On the basis of Jesus’ finished work on the cross, God offers us full pardon. The truth is not expressed more beautifully anywhere than in Isaiah 53.

He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.   
Isa 53:5 NIV

So, again, the wonderful Good News is this. **God offers us a clean slate because of Jesus!**

Poem “Satisfied” by Clara Tear Williams

1. All my life long I had panted  
   For a draught from some cool spring,  
   That I hoped would quench the burning  
   Of the thirst I felt within.
2. Feeding on the husks around me,  
   Till my strength was almost gone,  
   Longed my soul for something better,  
   Only still to hunger on.
3. Poor I was, and sought for riches,  
   Something that would satisfy,  
   But the dust I gathered round me  
   Only mocked my soul's sad cry.’

Chorus: Hallelujah! I have found Him–

Whom my soul so long has craved!

Jesus satisfies my longings;

Through his blood I now am saved.

1. Well of water, ever springing,  
   Bread of life, so rich and free,  
   Untold wealth that never faileth,  
   My Redeemer is to me.

# Then we are ready to fulfil God’s purposes for us.

When God forgives us, he cleanses our lives. He cleans our slate.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9 NIV

We then have peace in our relationship with God (Rom. 5:1). We have a new lease on life. Our life is now a new creation day by day, useful to God in fulling the purposes for which he created us. God treats us as if we had never sinned.

There is an interesting story that comes from the Presidency of Abraham Lincoln that illustrates well what it means to us when we are treated as if we had never sinned.

Some years before Abraham Lincoln was President, Edwin M. Stanton was working with him as joint counsel in a legal case. Stanton treated Lincoln very unfairly. The friction between the two of them continued when Lincoln became President as Stanton was angry that his rival should be so elevated. But Lincoln magnanimously asked Stanton to be his Secretary of War and sent the invitation by a mutual acquaintance who knew all about the trouble between them. Edwin Stanton was so impressed by the forgiveness implied in the offer that he could not believe that it was real. He said this to the messenger, “Do you tell me that Mr. Lincoln sent this message to me? Tell him that such undeserved favor will make me work with him as man has never worked before!”

When God gives us a clean slate he looks at us just as if we had never sinned and he starts us out in a new life of service to him. Our clean slate is not an end in itself, but a new beginning making us ready for the good works that God has prepared for us.

# Conclusion

Perhaps there is someone here this morning who would say to me, “Pastor Kelvin, my slate is hopelessly dirty! How can I get this cleaning job God offers me?”

Are you willing to part company with the intentional sins of the life and with God’s help stop making those ugly marks? The Bible calls such willingness to change “repentance.” Notice that I did not say that we had to be able to change our lives on our own. All of us are unable to change on our own, that's our problem. God only asks us to be willing to change, he'll do the rest!

Then, if you are willing to change, simply show God your dirty slate–tell him. Acknowledge your sins to God. The Scripture calls that confession and promises that if we confess our sins, God will forgive us and cleanse us (1 John 1:9).

Then accept what Jesus has done for you. Believe that Jesus died for you. And the Holy Spirit will perform the miracle of new birth in your life. God’s refreshing works that go by the big words of regeneration and justification will be yours.

Then tell someone what you have done. Affirm your decision by telling someone else. If we are not willing to tell someone else, the enemy of our souls will fill us with doubts. So, tell someone for Jesus’ sake and for yours.

Finally remember the promise;

Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Phil 1:6 NIV

* Repent – be willing to change
* Acknowledge your sins to God
* Accept what Jesus has done for you. Believe in him.
* Affirm your decision to be a Christ follower
* Remember God’s promise to help you