

Someone suggested that God works with people like a jeweler works with gems. God finds them and brings them to the light by cutting, polishing, and placing them in a beautiful setting. In their natural state, diamonds appear as hard, irregular lumps that shine only with a greasy luster and not at all with their finished brilliance. Their beauty is given them by the skill of the stonecutter, who grinds and polishes their surfaces so that they sparkle. Experts in Paris studied the Tiffany diamond for an entire year before a single blow was struck in the cutting. The greatest care is taken by the jeweler not to damage the stone in any way. Every flaw must be cut out, even microscopic flaws (Lois Hoadley Dick, Amy Carmichael, *Let the Little Children Come*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1984, 149).

People can be compared to diamonds because something or someone must remove our flaws before we can shine with the brightness God intended. Our passage from Hebrews tells of God’s method of taking care of our flaws. Cathy Lessmann of the Lutheran School of Theology in St. Louis suggests the “ins and the outs” of God’s method in six steps found in this passage:

(<http://www.crossings.org/theology/theolo414.htm>. Retrieved 10/31/03):

**Step One** is the *initial diagnosis* which reveals our external problem of contaminated lives. We think of the saints of God as living peaceful, harmonious lives and of being one with God. But the reality of our lives causes us to throw up our hands in despair. What we experience is exactly the opposite—often misery. We experience a lack of one-ness with God. Evil comes from our hearts which gives us feelings of guilt.

Pastor Robin Myers once saw a sign in front of a church that said, “If you’re done with sin, come on in.” But then he noticed written underneath that in smaller letters (printed in lipstick), “But if you’re not quite through, call 355-0722!” Truth is, none of us is done with sin quite yet.

**Step Two** is the *advanced diagnosis*, which reveals our internal problem to be scapegoating. It’s no secret that we have guilty hearts. We have two preferred ways to cleanse ourselves of guilt. The first way was introduced by Adam and Eve, and that is to blame our evil on someone else. We frantically search until we find a scapegoat onto which we can transfer our sin and guilt. We make the scapegoat take the blame for us. We can see many examples of this strategy at work in current political campaigns. It’s a blame game. Many people say, “It’s my parents fault.” “It’s my spouse’s fault.” “It’s because of you I’m this way.” “It’s the government’s fault,” and on and on.

But there are problems with each of our ways of dealing with sin. Sometimes we become someone else’s scapegoat, which piles our guilt even higher. The Israelites formalized this into their sacrificial system. In fact, their sacrificial system gave us the term *scapegoat*. They literally laid their hands on a goat, symbolically transferring their sin to the goat. Then the goat was banished to die in the wilderness. It didn’t really work very well for the Israelites.

The second way we try to rid ourselves of sin is by offering up our own good works as a sacrifice for our sins. We argue, “But I am a good person!” The writer of Hebrews calls these works “*acts that lead to death*” or “*useless rituals*” (6:1; 9:14). They’re dead because it is putting our trust anywhere but in God. This method also leaves us dangling in uncertainty. Can the sacrifice of “good works” really outweigh our

“bad works”? Only the Judge of human hearts can make that assessment, but most of us already know the answer.

**Step Three** is the *final diagnosis*, which means taking the heat. We do a lot of bluffing, but deep down we know that God will ultimately call our bluff. Then it’s time to pay the fiddler, as they say. “Paying up” involves giving our life-blood, personally consumed by the fire of God’s justice. And we can’t sidestep this or finesse ourselves out of this!

**Step Four** involves the *initial prognosis*. Cathy Lessmann calls this *the eternal solution*. To all of us who are gambling and looking for a scapegoat comes the astounding good news that God has turned the table on us to our advantage. We learn that God has become involved in ridding humans of sin and guilt once and for all. Jesus has taken on himself the role of priest-mediator and offered himself as the Scapegoat. Jesus voluntarily became humanity’s Scapegoat. He willingly accepted all our sin and guilt on himself and willingly suffered death. His blood was the sacrifice made so that we humans can be purged of our sin and be one with God. And this offering is cosmic—it need never be repeated.

**Step Five** is the *advanced prognosis*. Cathy Lessmann calls this the *internal solution*, which makes us pure. All of us who are scapegoating gamblers have to make an about face through something called *repentance*. The word literally means to “turn around.” Repentance means to rethink or think again. It suggests a change in direction and implies a resulting change in the life we live” (*The Ministers Manual* for 2000, p. 110).

We are repeatedly reminded of our sin, but God is also pleased to see our good works that follow repentance. A minister who worked to try to get prostitutes to escape that line of work didn’t say to them, “Shame on you!” but instead, “Don’t you think God made you for more than this?” It’s easy to say how disappointed we are when someone fails us. But it may be that the most powerful thing we can do is to help the person move past their sinning. The world’s most evil crimes are committed by those who think that, deep down, they are Nobody. On the other hand, the most beautiful things in the world are done by those people who figure out, with a lot of love and encouragement, that they are Somebody. Somebody who is made by God for more than this.

**Step Six** is the *final prognosis*. The end result of the great Cosmic Deal is that contaminated human lives are purified and made “holy.” We are “holy” not only in the sense of being free of sin and guilt, but also “holy” in the sense of being set apart. We are set apart to witness to the marvelous beloved Scapegoat whose sacrifice was once-and-for-all. Christ has mediated a New Covenant that we “*may receive the promised eternal inheritance*” (v. 15), the “ins and outs.”

Our ideas of “blood” and “bloodlines” are archaic and poorly named, since the DNA blueprint we receive from our parents is transmitted by chromosomes and not blood. But “blood” is a powerful way to talk about life and its value. With the ancient Hebrews, as with most ancient folk, there was great awe at blood streaming from a dying person. We don’t see blood much these days unless we work in a Trauma center. Maybe we watched some flow from our veins into a bag in the donor coach today, but ours is nothing like the experience of ancient people who believed that life was literally in the blood. From their viewpoint it made sense. Lose your blood, lose your life. If we put ourselves in the place of our ancestors, we can

begin to understand what a shuddering experience it was for the ancient Hebrews to worship in the Temple and see animals killed in the sacrifices carried out there.

That was the center of their worship, offering to God the most important thing they owned and the closest thing to humanity—an animal’s life. As they watched the ceremonial death of an animal in worship, they believed that surrendering the animal’s life to God somehow represented them. In New Testament times people still thought of blood as life. The book of Hebrews states that the blood of animals slaughtered in worship had some religious benefit. It allowed people to know that they were ritually “decontaminated.” The procedure permitted people to return to the Hebrew community when they were ritually unclean. This outward rite let people know they were no longer *out* but *in*. The book of Hebrews, however, states that such sacrifices produced an external purity, but an animal’s dying could never change us within.

The early Christians knew that Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection created an inner purity they had never experienced after animals bled and died at the Temple. Their experience of being freed sprang from everything that Jesus taught and did and what happened to them. Jesus knows the “ins and outs” of earth and heaven, and through his effort, his suffering, and in the shedding of his blood, he brings us to God. Let us now share the provisions of his life given for us—his body broken for us, his life’s blood poured out to bring us in.

Verse 15 says, “*He has died as a ransom to set [us] free.*” Our Day of Atonement has come. Knowing the “ins and outs” assures us that eternal redemption is ours.

Therefore, let us come to the Lord’s Table this morning with grateful hearts. Praise the name of Jesus! Amen.