

# “The Hard Questions of Lent: 2) Is Jesus Really that Special”

a sermon by

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**Text: “...we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but for the sins of the whole world”  
(I John 2:1b-2).**

President Calvin Coolidge was known as a man of a very few words. He was often referred to as “Silent Cal.” On one occasion he was at a dinner party where he did not want to be sitting next to a woman he did not like. “Mr. President, she said, “I bet a friend a hundred dollars that I could get more than two words out of you. “You lose,” replied the President.

One Sunday Calvin Coolidge went to church without his wife, who was suffering from a terrible cold. When he returned, his wife tried to have a conversation with him.

“How was church?” she asked.

“Fine,” replied the President.

“What did the minister preach about?” she inquired, trying to strike up a conversation with her recalcitrant husband.

“He spoke about sin,” said the President.

“Well,” said his wife, becoming more and more impatient, “What did he say about it?”

“He said he was against it,” replied the President, ending all possibility of further conversation.

## I.

Over the Sundays of Lent we are looking at some of the “Hard Questions of Lent.” This past week we dealt with the question “How Do We Know There is a God?” This morning we raise the question “Is Jesus That Special?”

The Letter of I John was concerned with that question. Very early on in the life of the church there were questions about Jesus. Was he really God or was he like God? Was he one revelation of God or was he the decisive revelation of God?

One of the remarkable ways that I John speaks of Jesus is in terms of love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (I John 4: 9-10).

The place to begin is with “sin.” The New Testament is adamant about this. “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God,” writes Paul. “There is none righteous, no not one.” Most of us think of sin as things we do. But it goes deeper than that. Paul Tillich in his book, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, speaks of sin as “separation.” To be in a state of sin is to be separated: separated from God, separated from each other, and separation from ourselves. That is the great dilemma of human existence. Before sin is an act, it is a state.

We are separated from God. That is one of the reasons that we are so often filled with despair and meaninglessness. We know we should be related to God, but we feel emptiness and unease. Someone recently told the story of Albert Einstein who once boarded the train in Princeton. When the conductor came by, Einstein struggled and struggled to find his ticket, but he could not. He searched his briefcase, his pockets, but with no success. “Don’t worry,” said the conductor, “We all know who you are.” When the conductor returned after the next stop, he looked and saw that Einstein was still foraging around for his ticket. The conductor laughed. “Dr. Einstein,” he said, “We all know who you are. You don’t have to worry about your ticket.” Einstein replied, “I know who I am too. I just don’t know where I am going.” How many of us have felt a sense of loss. We long to know the presence of God, but it seems so elusive, so difficult. We don’t know where we are going.

We are also separated from each other. T. S. Elliot’s play, “The Cocktail Party,” describes a scene that is familiar to all of us. We are often surrounded by people and noise and talk, and yet we feel alone. We are estranged from each other. Husbands are estranged from wives and wives from husbands. Children are estranged from their parents and parents from their children.

We are also estranged from ourselves. A famous psychologist wrote a book, entitled *Man Against Himself*, in which he spoke of a condition that is familiar to all of us. We often condemn self-love, but what we really mean to condemn is contrary to self-love. It is a mixture of selfishness and self-hate that permanently pursues us, prevents us from loving other people, and keeps us from losing ourselves in God’s love for us. Only the person who has learned to love himself can love another. Only the person who can set aside the contempt he has for himself, can

set aside the contempt he has for others. That is why there is in each of us an instinct for self-destruction, just as there is an instinct for self-preservation.

The Apostle Paul understood the battle that rages within us. “For I do not do the good I desire,” he observed, “but rather the evil that I do not desire.”

## II.

But if sin is the separation and self-destruction that abound around and in us, then God’s grace is God’s love that is poured out to us through Jesus Christ. That is what the author of I John means when he says, “But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of all the world” (I John 2:1-2).

That is what is special about Jesus. In the Presbyterian Church we speak of Christ as the “Mediator.” The gulf that separates us from God is so long and so broad that we cannot bridge that chasm. It must be done for us. The one who does this is Jesus Christ. He does this through his death on a cross.

Over the years the church has used many images to speak of the work of Christ. For some Jesus was an example. For others he was a teacher. I John calls it an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

The Apostle Paul, speaking of the same reality says, “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” I don’t believe that he said these words to be sentimental or to insist that there is a happy ending for every tragedy in life. He says them because they describe the most overwhelming and determining experience in his life. In his encounter with the risen Christ on that road to Damascus, he found himself accepted in spite of being rejected. And when he found that he was accepted, he was finally able to accept himself and be reconciled to others as well.

That is what we mean by God’s love for us. It strikes us when we are in great pain and restless. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valleys of meaninglessness and empty lives. It strikes us when we are alienated from those that we know we should love. It tells us that we are accepted by God through what Jesus Christ has done for us and because we are accepted by God, we can accept others and ourselves as well.

That is what is special about Jesus Christ. He does for us what no one else can do. He bridges the distance between God and us.

## III.

The result of this, as I John reminds us, is that we are called to obey God’s commandments. He goes on to say, “whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection” (I John 2:5).

Harry Emerson Fosdick once spoke of the “great compulsion” that stands before each of us who have experienced God’s grace. Something has taken hold of us. We are not our own. Something now possesses us.

Now compulsion is a part of every life here. One way or another, life coerces us in such fashion that we cannot escape the word “must.” The great musicians, Beethoven, Mozart, and Bach had that compulsion. They had to compose music. No one made them do it. But they had something inside of them that makes it impossible not to compose. They had to give their lives to their music.

The same was true of the Apostle Paul. “I must also see Rome,” he said. Why? No one made him. But deep inside him was a driving force.

That is true of all the great saints. No one made Mother Theresa go to the streets of Calcutta. No one made David Livingston leave his home in Scotland and become a missionary to Africa. There was something inside of them.

That is true of us as well. What drives you? What is the most important thing in your life? Is it your job, your family, some hobby or pastime?

Surely in the Lenten Season we ought to open our lives to Christ’s claim on his. He has done everything for us. What are we willing to do for him?

In the hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” there is a verse that speaks to us.

“Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all. ”

Amen!