

(Christian History) 10. the Flagellants

by David Guzik

David Guzik's sermon explores the flagellant movement during the Black Death, highlighting its misguided practices and the dangers of self-atonement in contrast to the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Salvation By Grace", "Repentance And Faith"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the medieval mindset of trying to earn salvation through self-inflicted suffering. He references a movie called 'The Mission' where the lead character demonstrates repentance by climbing a rope with heavy armor on his back and then throwing it off a cliff. The speaker highlights how people are willing to endure physical discipline and rigorous service in order to purchase their salvation. However, the speaker contrasts this with the simple message of the gospel, which is to believe in Jesus Christ and receive salvation as a free gift through grace and faith.

Transcript

In this tenth lecture on our series through church history, we're going to consider a movement known as the flagellant movement. Not because they were super big, not because they were super influential, but because, sort of like the Montanist movement that we discussed several lectures ago, I think that they show us some important things about medieval society, why they needed the Reformation so badly, and then it's also very instructive in a spiritual sense for us today to understand the motivations and the practices of this flagellant movement. When bubonic plague, the Black Death, was sweeping through Europe, again as we discussed in our previous lecture, that happened in sort of the middle of the 14th century, there arose a movement of common people, a lay movement.

It was concerned with holiness and purification and preparing the Christian community to face the judgment of God that was in their midst. Listen, when you've got one-third of the population dying around you, it's not hard to think that this is the judgment of God in your midst. And so people got serious about God, and one of the ways that this seriousness was expressed, we would say in a misguided way, were through these people known as the flagellants, because they very quickly took their devotion for holiness and purity and settled into what we would consider to be greatly unbiblical and ungodly practices.

And therefore they were branded as heretics, and we would say rightly so. Now variations of this sect date before the Black Death, all the way back to the 13th century. I think there's indications as early as the year 1259, beginning in Italy.

But they marched across the European continent in impressive numbers in this middle period, 1347, 1349, these years of the Great Black Death. Christendom was reeling under the horrors of plague time. Again, one-third, some estimates even say one-half, I think one-third is probably a better estimate.

One-third of the population of Europe lay dead in what was evident to everybody as the harsh judgment of God, and as they interpreted, against a corrupt institutional church and against a corrupt society. This fear of God's judgment brought together a very diverse group. Among the flagellants would be bishops and lay people, would be princes and peasants, would be men and women.

Rich and poor came together on this under the banner of the flagellants. They generally wore a white outer garment with a bold red cross on the front and the back. They would wear caps with the same red cross on them, and they would march from city to city in great processions, carrying signs and singing hymns as they marched.

As they would go from city to city, twice a day they would gather together in a churchyard or in a public square in the city to endure what they called their daily discipline. Again, they did it twice a day, so they didn't seem to call it their twice daily discipline, but they did it twice a day and that's what they called it. First, they would read a letter that was supposedly laid on the altar of St. Peter's Church in Jerusalem by an angel.

They said this letter was delivered by an angel to St. Peter's in Jerusalem. The letter said that Christ was angry at the world's wickedness and that he would soon bring judgment. Mercy was promised on the condition that these people, the flagellants, would gather together and make pilgrimages of suffering lasting 33 days, corresponding to the days of Jesus's earthly ministry.

Now, do you understand the whole concept of the pilgrimage? This was a big deal in the medieval Catholic Church. You took a pilgrimage both as a vacation, number one, let's face it, that's what a pilgrimage was, but also as a way to seek God and to earn time off of purgatory. And so people would go to different places on their pilgrimages.

They might go to a place where there was known for healing and for springs of great power. They might go to a church such as the Cathedral in Cologne, which supposedly had the skulls of the three wise men there in a golden case up on the altar. They would go to a place known for its famous relics here or there.

And basically you took a pilgrimage based on what you could afford and what kind of time you had, right? You would make this long journey, but the Church promised you you would be rewarded with time off of purgatory for your work in this pilgrimage. Well, that's how the flagellants saw their work. They saw it as their own personal pilgrimage.

And then after they read the letter, after they received this message to do this pilgrimage for 33 days, then this group of flagellants in the public square twice a day would strip down to their waist, fall on their knees, and fall on their faces three times. Then what they would do is they would whip themselves with a whip usually embedded with sharp pieces of iron in the end of the strands of the whip. They would whip themselves rhythmically in time of the music of their hymns.

And then as they did that, they would make gestures to indicate what particular sin they had been addicted to. So the drinker might put his hand to his mouth like that. The gambler would move his hand as if he was throwing dice, and so forth.

Blood would often be seen flowing down the bodies of these zealous people as they would whip themselves and make some sort of public confession of their sin. They would sing these songs, and one song that sort of awkwardly translated from the German read this. It said, Now join us who will repent.

Let's flee the fiery heat of hell. Lucifer is a bad companion, whom he grabs, he covers with tar. Let us flee away from him.

Whoso will through our penance go, let him restore that which he's taken away. And so, you know, they would do these practices traveling from village to village, from town to town, through the 33 days of their pilgrimage. One medieval historian, a man named Jean Frossart, he writes this from his history of the Hundred Years' War.

He says, The penitents went about coming first out of Germany. They were men who did public penance and scourged themselves with whips of hard knotted leather with little iron spikes. Some made themselves bleed very badly between the shoulder blades, and some foolish women had cloths ready to catch the blood and smear it upon their eyes, saying that it was miraculous blood.

While they were doing penance, they sang very mournful songs about nativity and the passion of our Lord. The object of this penance was to put a stop to the mortality, for in that time, at least a third of all the people in the world died. So you can see this very strange and radical thing that they were doing was sort of meant to make a public confession of repentance to stop the Black Death, the plague that was ravaging Europe.

This movement failed to secure much of a following in the British islands, but the fervor of the flagellants captured the imagination of much of the European continent. With the judgment of God present in such unmistakable power, mainly again because of the plague, Christians were compelled to respond to what they felt God was doing in their midst. The flagellants believed that God wanted the church to atone for its sin by these brutal acts of self-punishment.

Now you see, if the plague was indeed the manifestation of God's anger, then Christians should do everything they could to repent and to stop that anger. From this very simple motivation came the flagellants, these groups of people who would wander throughout the towns and countrysides doing their penance in public. As they inflicted these sufferings upon themselves, they were actually trying to atone for the evil of the world.

They were sort of sacrificing themselves for the world's sins in imitation of Jesus. Generally, society thought they were strange and did not approve of them. The flagellants also showed a very violent tendency, as these wandering groups who would make their pilgrimages of 33 days had a tendency to kill groups of Jews whom they encountered, and they even killed clergymen who spoke out against them.

In October 1349, the Pope condemned them and he ordered all authorities to suppress them. But the flagellants kept reappearing, in particular during times of plague, well into the 15th century. There was a reappearance of public flagellation within the church after the Reformation.

Catherine de' Medici and King Henry III of France encouraged the flagellant orders, but Henry IV forbade them. The Jesuits, after a time, abandoned this public penance and the practice died out again, although from time to time it would arise. In Spanish America, flagellant orders persisted, usually in defiance of ecclesiastical disapproval.

In New Mexico, the Hermanos Penitentes, a flagellant order, is said to practice secret rites even today. And so even in the modern world, there are people who follow this practice of this self-atonement. It's essentially what it is, right? I will atone for my own sins and for the sins of the world by making myself suffer.

Now we take a look at this, and first of all we say this is a very medieval way of thinking, right? There's nothing in the Bible to give you the idea to do this, but these are people desperately trying to break through to God and to do something about their current crisis, and they're willing to do radical steps in order to receive it. Do you see how greatly people will work in order to try to earn their own salvation? I don't know if you've ever seen the movie, it's a pretty good movie, I don't know, 20 years ago, Robert De Niro, I believe, was the lead actor in it. It's called *The Mission*, and it's about a Roman Catholic mission to South America.

And actually it's a pretty good movie, because Robert De Niro, if I remember correctly, I might have it wrong, but if I remember correctly, he plays the role of a soldier, a very brutal, violent soldier, who becomes remarkably converted and he begins to follow God and what he has to go through to do it. And in one of the early scenes of the movie, as a way for Robert De Niro to express his conversion and his repentance to God, he has to climb up a rope, and the cliff must be 200, 300 yards high, it's a huge cliff, and he has to climb up a rope, up that cliff, with all of his soldier's armor bundled up on his back. So you can only imagine what a dangerous and what a difficult thing this would be, to scamper your way up a rope with this very heavy load on your back, and then once finally when he makes it up to the top, he cuts the armor that had been tied to his back, and he throws it down the cliff, and it smashes on the rocks below, and it's his demonstration of repentance from the life.

And what's very interesting about that, is that men and women will gladly do that kind of thing, won't they? They will gladly endure the most rigorous physical discipline, the most rigorous service, if by some means they can purchase their salvation by it, right? If you could tell people, if you crawl on your hands and knees over broken glass to spittle, and you will be saved, they'll do it. But yet the great contrast, the offense to human reason, is the simple message of the gospel, believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. To be able to say that there's nothing I can do to earn or to merit my own salvation, it's the free gift of Jesus Christ that I must receive by grace, through faith, that's a completely different thing, isn't it? But this instinct within the human nature is very, very deep.

And I would suggest to you that even though flagellant orders exist today, they're certainly not very popular. But I would say this, that the spirit of the flagellants is still with us today, and it's still among evangelical Christians, people who feel that they must make some kind of atonement for their own sin, instead of genuinely believing that Jesus Christ paid the penalty for their sin on the cross. You know, every time we adopt an attitude that says, I don't deserve blessing from God because I've sinned, so here's my punishment from God, I won't be blessed today.

That's basically saying, I'll punish myself or I'll be punished as an atonement for our sins. You see, you may refuse to receive God's love because you feel unworthy of it. And to be unloved is your self-assigned punishment for sin, right? You're not getting out the leather whip with the little iron sharp things in the end and whipping yourself, but spiritually and psychologically you're whipping yourself, right? You're saying, I will remain unloved to punish myself because I'm not worthy enough.

You see, in another way we can do it. We might say, I won't allow any close relationships to develop with any brothers or sisters in the body of Christ, because that's a blessing reserved for people who aren't like me. You can inflict your own punishments upon yourself by the way that you hate yourself, by the way that you despise other people or whatever, but you see, this is the spirit of the flagellants.

And the real tragedy of it is that this self-atonement is a very popular way of dealing with guilt among Christians. You know, the last thing that the devil wants you to do when you feel like a guilty sinner is to look to Jesus and to look to him alone and to be able to say, as one of the later reformers said, Martin Luther, that we'll get into him much more even tonight, as he was able to say, yes, I know that I am a great sinner, but Jesus Christ is a great Savior. You know, that's really the spirit of it all, is to be able to say, I put my full confidence in the atoning work of Jesus Christ on my behalf.

And the real tragedy of the flagellants, whether they be ancient flagellants or modern flagellants, is that in spite of all of their efforts at self-atonement, they can never really come to a place of peace. Honestly, how do you know if you've whipped yourself enough? How do you know if you've shed enough blood? How do you know if one 33-day pilgrimage was enough? How do you know if one day that you tell yourself, okay, no blessing for me today, I'm in the status of unloved. How do you know if one day or two days or two weeks or six months or whatever it is that you assign yourself to, how do you know that that's enough? You see, self-atonement is not only wrong, it's ineffective.

It does not please God. God will not accept the shedding of your blood or the punishment of yourself as a sacrifice for sins. Now, self-atonement never satisfies the self, again, because we never know when we've paid enough.

And this makes self-atonement dangerous, because it can always lead to either depression and unbelief, or what might be worse, the presumptuous pride that says that you have earned your way, right? That's probably the even worse situation, where the flagellant whips himself enough, either literally or figuratively, and he comes forth from it saying, yep, I've earned my way before God. That is probably an even more dangerous place to be in. Now listen, it's true that there is a work of God in our life of what we might call purifying correction, right? Where God does discipline us.

The writer of the Hebrews explains this very powerfully, where God disciplines us as a father disciplines his children. But we must respond to that work of discipline that God does in our life in the right way. You see, if self-atonement is ineffective and dangerous, then what is the right way? I think the writer of the Hebrews tells us.

He says, this man Jesus, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, for by one offering he has perfected forever those who are being sanctified. The whole key to it is getting eyes off of self and putting the eyes on Jesus Christ. And so when you feel God's chastisement in your life, because there's a huge difference between the chastising discipline that God brings into your life and your own efforts at self-atonement, when God brings that into your life, then you have to realize that it's God's work within me, and I'll receive it as his purifying judgment, but I will keep my eyes on Jesus Christ in the midst of it all.

You know, you think of these medieval flagellants, and you think of them, you know, marching by groups of hundreds of people, and you think of them twice a day stripping down to the waist and whipping themselves, and you think of the strange and sort of pathetic, superstitious women running and getting little cloths and soaking the blood of the flagellants because they had a superstitious interest in the power

of that blood, and you think of the whole surrounding with the death and the revolution in the culture caused by the plague and all the rest of it, and you think of it, you think how tragic, how sad, but let me tell you, they had an excuse. You know what their excuse was? They did not have ready access to the Bible. In some ways, the biblical ignorance of that flagellant is excusable, because it would have taken extraordinary effort for them to really know the truth of the Bible.

I don't know what excuses our efforts at self-atonement, because we have the Word of God right in front of us that tells us, but this whole spirit, this whole mentality reflected by the flagellants that I will earn my own salvation, I will make my own way before God, and I will do it in some open demonstrable way that demonstrates to me and to everybody else that I am indeed saved. That was in many ways the spirit of medieval Christianity. Now look, I don't want to be entirely negative about medieval Christianity, right? I think one of the amazing things about medieval Christianity was its focus upon God.

Look, you go around to some of these amazing great cathedrals that were built in medieval times, right? And one thing you have to say about it was at least in those days they built their most spectacular buildings unto God, right? They did. The most spectacular buildings of the medieval times were the cathedrals, and that was a way of expressing that. Think fast forward to our own modern age.

What are the most spectacular buildings that people build today? Shopping malls, government buildings, sports theaters, skyscrapers, business places, office buildings and such. Isn't that a remarkable testimony of priority, right? The spectacular buildings in our modern culture are dedicated to business, to government, and to pleasure, right? You ever been to Las Vegas and seen the casinos there, right? I mean, that's the effort, right? That's the idea. At least in the medieval world, they had a focus upon God, but we have to say that the focus upon God was sadly and strangely twisted at many points.

Not every point. There were shining lights, of course, but at too many points it was sadly twisted and put into an unhealthy and ungodly focus. Well, there were great men to come along to challenge these ideas, and great men who came before Martin Luther.

And so in our next lecture, that's exactly what we're going to discuss. We're going to discuss some of these important forerunners before Luther. We're going to discuss John Wycliffe, John Hus, and Desiderius Erasmus, and especially we're going to discuss why they weren't Luther's.

You know what I mean? What was it about them that didn't make for a Martin Luther who came, of course, sort of in their footsteps?

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