

A pastor got a phone call from a woman who recently had been mauled by her neighbor's dogs. She wasn't a member of his congregation or a Christian, but he agreed to meet her and talk about her ordeal. She limped into his office with jagged stitches on her face and bandages on both arms and legs. "It's karma," she said. "I've done some terrible things in my life, and now I have to pay the price." Sadly, she was convinced karma wasn't finished with her yet. Her sins were far worse than the punishment of a few dozen dog bites.

1. Where can a sinner go for help when she thinks God exists only to even the score? It turns out this poor woman was looking not for a Christian pastor but for a religious *guru* to give her a list of things to do that might placate God's anger. What else could she do but wait in fear for the hammer to fall again?

She is an extreme example of a malady that's all too common - living in the world with a guilty conscience. You don't have to be a religious person to have this debilitating disease. No one needs the Ten Commandments to know things like lying, cheating, stealing, and hurting other people are wrong - and that you deserve to be punished for doing them. A guilty conscience is living in fear - fear of losing the respect of others, of losing your spouse, or job. It's the terrifying prospect of seeing your face on a YouTube video with thousands of comments underneath - all condemning you for the secret you're so desperate to hide. The worst thing is the isolation. You can't have a genuine relationship with the people around you or with God. Even when the dogs are biting, you can't cry out to God for help, because His job is to make sure you pay for your sins.

It's like being on a raft all by yourself in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The sun's beating down. There's no land in sight. And no one to call for help. You spend your days waiting for the next big wave or storm to dump you out of the boat & into the deep where the sharks are waiting.

Where can a sinner go for help when he thinks God only exists to even the score? I think a lot more people are living this way than we realize. They've grown used to it as a way of life. But it's a sad life of fear and isolation - waiting for the day "karma" will finally catch up with you.

2. The problem is worse than most people think. People with a guilty conscience understand God is good and that they are not, because they've done bad things. Most people think that we're called sinners because we sin. But God says we sin because we are sinners. And that is a lot worse.

Maybe you've heard something like this: "People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more

naturally to the human heart.” It sounds nice and hopeful. But is it really as easy as saying “stop hating” and “start loving”? The Bible says the opposite is true. The Ten Commandments teach people to stop hating and start loving, but God says the Law can only *reveal* the disease. It can’t cure it. Our fallen human nature is incapable of loving God or loving one another as we should. By nature, we love ourselves - and our charity for others extends only until it gets in the way of loving myself, even if loving myself just means giving myself a good feeling for being so generous.

People who try to become right with God by following the Law are fighting a losing battle against the symptoms without seeking the cure for the disease. Where does it leave people who try and try to stop doing the things that make them feel guilty - only to discover that the harder they try, the more they’re drawn to do those very things? If you had a fruit tree that kept producing sour, rotten fruit, eventually you’d decide there’s something wrong with the tree.

The problem is not just that we’ve done bad things; it’s far worse. God is light, and we are darkness. God is fire, and we are ice. In our fallen human nature, we’re incompatible with God, and there’s nothing we can do about it. That’s why, as soon as Peter realized who was on his fishing boat, he fell on his knees and begged Jesus to go away: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man” (v 8).

Most people believe the problem of sin is as easy to solve as teaching people to “stop hating” and “start loving.” They’re sadly mistaken. Unlike most people, Peter understood the problem was far worse. We sin because we’re sinners.

3. Peter was afraid because he realized behind the human flesh of the rabbi Jesus burned the terrifying glory of God. What he didn’t realize was that God took on human flesh to *cure* the debilitating disease of sin.

In Jesus, God calls terrified sinners into His wonderful net.

Peter was a fisherman who’d had a really bad night. Over and over, he’d cast his nets into the deep, dark water, only to pull them up empty. The next morning, he was on the shore cleaning his nets when Jesus asked to use his boat for a pulpit. Peter had a front-row seat at church that morning, listening to the word of God from the mouth of the famous rabbi. When the sermon was over, the preacher told the fisherman, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch” (v 4). “I’ll do it,” Peter said. “But I think you should leave the fishing to me. I guarantee there are no fish out there.”

That’s when it happened. No sooner had those nets hit the water than they were filled to the breaking point with fish - so many fish they had to call

another boat for help; so many fish that both of those boats were sinking from the weight of them. You would think Peter would beg Jesus to go fishing with him every day. But Peter didn't see dollar signs when he looked at all those fish. He saw danger. It was far worse for him than seeing your darkest secret exposed on YouTube. Holy God was with him in the boat! Peter fell down on the deck with those flopping fish and begged, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

Like those fish out of water, Peter was waiting to die, and in a way, the old sinful Peter did die. But then God breathed new life into him with a word: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men" (v 10). By that powerful word, God lifted the burdens of guilt and sin from Peter's shoulders. Peter was no longer afraid of God's presence. He longed to be as near to God as he could. He left everything behind to follow Jesus.

Jesus went fishing for men that day. He cast the net of His powerful word into the deep water of this world and pulled a terrified sinner up onto the boat. What a wonderful thing to be caught up in Jesus' net!

Peter was afraid when he realized who was on the boat with him. What he didn't realize was why Jesus stepped onto his boat. God had come to cure him of the disease of guilt and sin. His fear melted away when he heard the word of Jesus.

4. Jesus said to him, "From now on you will be catching men." Like the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament Reading, God sanctified the lips of Peter and the other apostles to preach His powerful, holy Word. From the boat that is the church, Peter cast the net of the Gospel into the deep water, and God pulled billions of human beings onto the deck.

The Good News Peter preached is that God sent His glorious Son to take on human flesh so that He could take human sins onto Himself - your sins, Peter's sins, and the sins of the whole world - die on a cross, and on the third day rise again. Jesus absorbed every bit of bad so-called karma and every bit of God's real and righteous anger the moment He died. Not only that, but when God baptized you into Jesus' death the old sinful you also died, and a new person arose. The only cure for the disease of sin is death and resurrection - and that's exactly what Jesus gave to you in Baptism, like He did for little Eloise this morning. Cured of the disease, you can confidently call on God in every situation. This doesn't mean you won't struggle with your old sinful nature; it means the new you will seek God's help when you do struggle. The deck of the boat that is the church is where you find that help. The same holy flesh and blood that stepped onto Peter's boat is here today on this altar - the glory of

God hidden in the bread and wine. He is here to help you.

It is a most wonderful thing to have been caught in Jesus' net! God has taken the heavy burden of guilt and fear from your shoulders and given you new life. Instead of running away from God, you now long to be as close to Him as you can.

Jesus said to Peter, "From now on you will be catching men." Peter threw out the net, and God pulled billions of people onto the boat that is the church.

5. And now Jesus has put the net into **our** hands. Peter said as much: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9). Like Isaiah, like the apostles, God sanctified your lips to speak His powerful, holy Word to suffering sinners.

I wonder how many people are out there living with the terrible disease of a guilty conscience. How many are living in fear of being discovered, waiting for "karma" to catch up? How many don't know that God loves them and wants to help them? We will never know unless we cast the net.

We have the cure in our hands. God sanctified **our** lips to speak His powerful, holy Word to suffering sinners. There is still room on the boat.

And if you're thinking, "The water around here has been fished out. We've thrown out our nets and drawn up nothing for a long time now." I know what Jesus would say. Don't you?