

# Atoning Human Nature

Chaplain Jared Anderson  
(Sermon to be presented at the Utah State Prison)

I have something important to tell each and every one of you. This truth will change your life. Ready?

You are kind of pathetic.

Before you walk out (oh wait, you can't; this is a prison), let me add that I'm pathetic too. We all are. Every one of us. As humans, as a rule, we are profoundly disappointing. We are lazy and self-centered. We use every opportunity to get what we want, often at the cost of others. And to top it all off, we usually will deny that we are doing any such thing!

And I know you are going to tell me about what an angel your mom is, or perhaps that no, you really are just that awesome, and I'll believe you. But in general, we are as good as our contexts. We are as good as we are motivated to be, or feel we need to be. We do whatever we need to get what we want, and not much more. But we also feel the pull to look good for our friends, or not to disappoint our mom, or to be worthy of God's expectations. The very best of us don't want to disappoint ourselves. That's character, old school.

Wait for the plot twist though... the weakness of human nature actually is the secret to salvation! More on that shortly. First, we need to dig into the extent of the problem.

It turns out that we don't so much crave being good, as we crave \*being thought of as good\*, including by ourselves. This is why accountability is so important... we will get away with as much as we can justify to ourselves. We deserve it, right? We are always making excuses, telling "rational lies". And that's why we need a constant practice to remind ourselves of our tendencies, to compensate for them, and in doing so, overcome those tendencies, or at least work within them to be as good as we possibly can, and better tomorrow than we are able to be today.

Our human nature is the bad news. Our human nature makes us an "enemy to God", as Mosiah 3:19 states. In other words, our human nature is at opposition with the nature of God, with our better nature, our divine nature. As a rule, nothing short of pain and structure can get us to behave well. Pain gets our attention, as much as we hate that fact. Consequences also get our attention. Pain and consequences are our human and social alarm systems.

What do we do with these alarms? We are attempted to shut them off through denial or distraction. In fact, we all do. Don't turn them off. Learn from them. Use them to change.

Here's the gospel paradox: We are most likely to learn the truth when we admit how wrong we are. Strength comes from acknowledging our weakness. We could even say

the path to freedom must be through prison--usually a prison not quite so literal as this one, but limiting beliefs and behaviors lock us in to bad habits and damn us from learning and growth.

We rightly focus our attention on the last week of Jesus' life, the week Christians believe that Jesus Christ accomplished his saving work of redeeming humanity through the Atonement. Jesus protested the corruption of the temple, commemorated his Last Supper with his disciples, prayed in Gethsemane. He was then flogged and crucified, and buried in the family tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, unable to save him but sympathetic to his cause. The women lovingly came to attend Jesus in the tomb, and were surprised to find it empty. With their belief in the resurrection, devastation turned to vindication, horror to hope. With their change in perspective, they understood their lives differently. They lived their lives differently. Jesus expressed disappointment and abandonment on the cross, and we should take that seriously. But in yet another paradox, the changed lives of Jesus' disciples, and billions of disciples since, have brought the kingdom Jesus predicted during his ministry.

When Jesus was troubled (having just gotten into trouble at the temple, a major seat of cultural power), he gathered close his closest friends. During his last supper, he reinterpreted the Passover meal--symbolic of deliverance--to a symbol of remembrance and covenant. Then he retreated the olive grove Gethsemane, or perhaps even to a cave or room underneath, in the olive press itself (Gat-Shemen means "Olive press"). Do we adequately hear what Jesus prays? He prays, "Father, Abba, Daddy... please stop this. I don't want to do this. I don't want to get caught, don't want to die. This isn't what I expected. If there is any other possible way, please, do that." I don't think we sit with this prayer enough. We all relate to it though. Life doesn't turn out the way we expect or hope. We all pray "If there is any other way, please, deliver me." But all of us must internalize the second half of Jesus' prayer as well. "There is no other way. What happened happened, what is, is. I will accept what is, however hard, however bitter."

And Jesus' final hours were bitter, as we know. He was betrayed by a dear friend, arrested by authorities, and put on trial. He was a prophet, a reformer, a visionary. And he was tried as a terrorist.

We all have a complicated relationship to guilt, innocence, and accountability. Not only have we all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), but we all constantly fall short of our own ideals, values, and commitments. We are guilty of things no one knows about, and we are innocent of some things we are accused of. None of you would know anything about that, right? And even more serious, we are all in denial about the extent of the problem.

Aleksander Solzhenitsyn was unjustly condemned to some of the most brutal conditions possible. He spent eight years in prisons and labor camps, starving and freezing, and three years in exile. Having experienced some of the worst of humanity, he shares his insights about the human condition:

“Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... an uprooted small corner of evil.

Since then I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world: They struggle with the evil inside a human being (inside every human being). It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.”

— Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* 1918-1956

Let's return to the gospels. When the dying speak, we listen. How much more should we listen to the final words of Jesus. The gospel records seven statements from the cross, and Jesus' dying words teach us how to live, how to atone, how to find peace. Tradition names these statements the words of Forgiveness, Salvation, Relationship, Abandonment, Triumph, and Reunion. I'd like to briefly touch on how each of these apply to our own lives.

Jesus' statements from the cross have powerful lessons for us to ponder and practice.

His first statement is perhaps the most striking, as it is spoken to those who struck him, beat and flogged him mercilessly. “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Wow. We talked about human limitation... do any of us really “know what we are doing?” Even if people are cruel, usually that cruelty stems from hidden wounds. Are we able to use our understanding of human limitation to increase our forgiveness?

Next, Jesus notices the man crucified at his side. We don't know who this man was. Perhaps he was guilty. Perhaps he was guilty of those crimes Jesus was accused of. The man himself acknowledges his guilt, the justness of even the terrible penalty of crucifixion. And Jesus extends grace toward this gracious, fair comment, and says “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43). When others admit they are wrong, do we meet that honesty with grace, and extend them reconciliation?

After soothing the stranger Jesus speaks to his family, linking family of birth with family of choice. He repairs and realigns relationships. “Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother” (John 19:26-27). Do we nurture our family of choice? Do we use our words and actions to connect, even when we ourselves are in pain?

The next two statements from the cross have resonated with me in my darkest moments. In agony Jesus screams, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (Mark 15:34) In the language of his childhood, he cries “God, Father, why have you abandoned me? Why have you left me alone when I need you the most?” Do we have the courage and

vulnerability to admit when we feel alone and abandoned? Jesus also speaks up for his needs when he says “I thirst” (John 19:28).

Finally, simply, Jesus states, “It is finished.” (John 19:30). The Greek here is “tetelestai”. It is complete, has been finished. And from Luke 23:46, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” Jesus expresses his fear, vulnerability, but we also have traditions that express his affirmation and trust.

What do we learn from all of these accounts together? Jesus gathered his friends close. As he saw danger and even death approach, he asked that he not go through what was coming. He was honest, vulnerable, real. Even as he expressed his desires, he shifted his attitude, and committed himself to doing whatever was necessary. He accepted even this most difficult path. And he followed through, and finished. And he completed his life expressing both his fears and abandonment and caring and love. We can do the same. We are commanded to do the same.

Let’s come back to human nature. Yes, that disappointing, even pathetic human nature. How do we apply the atonement to our lives? How do we redeem that human nature and become more like the Savior? Paradoxically, by full inhabiting it. We practice the lessons we teach to children. We are honest, especially when we make mistakes. We admit when we are wrong. We apologize to those we have hurt. We seek forgiveness. And every day, we work to do better. I think too often we think of “doing better” as learning. Learning isn’t enough. We have to \*practice\* every day. It literally is a spiritual workout. Living well is hard, scary work. We are constantly tempted to slip and lie and avoid. There’s that human nature again. In our lazy human avoidance, we are strangers to God. Because God is about truth, about love, about freedom, about peace, about growth. And our natural human tendencies won’t get us there.

Here’s the miracle though. When you admit you are wrong, you are never more likely to find out what is right. When you admit you are in need, you are never more likely to get help. When you admit you are weak, you are never more likely to be made strong. That’s what God means in the Book of Mormon verse Ether 12:27... it does not say “I give unto humans weaknesses so that they can make a checklist and totally overcome each weakness one by one and then yay, they are perfect all on their own!” I know some people who try that way, but that’s not what God says here. God says that we are given WEAKNESS. Singular. God gives us human limitations, why? So that we will be HUMBLE. Because when we are humble, we aren’t trying to be perfect, though we do try to be better. When we are humble, we realize we won’t get it right. When we are humble, we are open to learning, apologizing, forgiving. When we are humble, we give and receive grace.

As humans, we cannot right our wrongs. We cause damage we cannot correct. Thus our need for grace. The most we can do in this life is make the most of our mistakes, spend the currency of our consequences, allow our past to break our hearts, make our spirits contrite, and do better, become better.

At the end of the day, on this day, and every day, that is what atonement means. Bringing together, reconciling our flaws and our ideals. Bringing together our relationships, which every day break and must be repaired. And most importantly, bring us into alignment with the proper way to live. We are oriented toward God and goodness, wherever we may be in any given moment. THAT is redemption in the moment, here and now.

And when we have that proper alignment, we have access to the Atonement. We experience the fruits of salvation, from moment to moment. We experience At-One-Ment in this moment, because we are on the path. It is about process and practice. And that brings peace.

And that will bring peace of conscience, that knowledge that within your limitations, within your humanness, you grant grace to yourself. You grant grace to others. You learn from others. You apologize when needed. And with that peace within yourself, you will bring the light of heaven onto earth, even the darkest corners of earth. As you pray, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..." you become a savior in your own sphere.

I understand in some contexts, including this one, you can't always say you are sorry, can't always show vulnerability. But you can always be honest in your own heart, admit you are wrong within yourself, and that will change your energy. That will change how people respond to you.

Like Jesus, each of us are both human and divine. We are angels. We are demons. We are human. Like Jesus, we are all invited, commanded to practice At-one-ment in our lives. As we embrace our humanness, and allow that humanness to humble us, we increase in our ability to be open and loving to others. And that humble alignment is what redeems us, bridging with grace our human nature and divine ideals. And it isn't about achievement, but rather attitude and alignment.

So yes, it is true that I am pathetic. We are pathetic.

But as we practice humility and grace, we are not pathetic, but powerful.

I pray we will practice this paradox, in the Exemplar's name, Amen.